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Chambers









THE SQUARE PEG





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BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF "LORD LEONARD THE LUCKLESS," ETC.

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THE SQUARE PEG

CHAPTER I

GREAT NEWS

Mrs. HADLOW, seated in her Chelsea house at the breakfast-table which her two young daughters had quitted and which still awaited the always tardy appearance of her eldest son, had been making intricate calculations with the aid of a pencil and a scrap of paper, and had arrived at the depressing conclusion that when your resources amount rigidly to so much, while your expenditure, roughly estimated, amounts to so much more, an annual deficit must result. This vexed the poor plump lady and made her look a little less good-humoured than usual. Plump she remained, despite the cares of life and the fifty well-rung years which had sprinkled with silver her abundant and once golden hair; poor in a relative—or perhaps it ought to be said even in a positive—sense she had found herself ever since her husband, a successful barrister in his day, had died, leaving her to bring up and educate four children upon a small fortune invested in trust securities. She was saying to herself that living in London is not cheap, whatever people may pretend,

that the maintenance of a young man at Cambridge is horribly dear, that female apparel runs away with a lot of money when the fashions change so constantly, and that, for her part, she couldn't at all see what the end of it was going to be, at this rate.

To her, thus wrapped in gloomy meditation, there presently entered a tall and handsome young fellow whose style of attire, taken in conjunction with his closely trimmed Vandyke beard and the length to which he permitted his crisp, dark hair to grow, proclaimed him at a glance to be an artist. He said, in accents of remonstrance:

"My dear mother, why will you always insist upon waiting for me?"

"I haven't waited," Mrs. Hadlow answered. "I finished my breakfast before the girls left for their class, half an hour ago. Yours is in the fender, keeping

did not anticipate from it any important addition to their joint capital.

"Well," she said at length; "some art-editor has given you a commission, I suppose?"

"On the contrary, the last art-editor to whom I applied has sent my stuff back to me with the usual complimentary letter and the usual regret that, owing to the degradation of the public taste, his magazine can only be made to pay its way by means of reproduced photographs. The truth, I am afraid, is that the prospects of workers in black and white have never looked more black or less white than they do at the present day. I confess that this man's refusal, coming on the top of so many previous ones, discouraged me a little, and I was asking myself whether I hadn't better advertise for somebody who might be willing to adopt a gifted, but hitherto unappreciated, pauper when I opened another letter which was waiting to be read, and found, if you please, that that was exactly what somebody had done!"

"Adopted you?" asked Mrs. Hadlow incredulously.

The young man nodded. "Just that. Oh, it's a perfectly genuine proposal—perfectly serious. And from a money point of view one must admit that it's seductive. My patron is Sir Martin Hadlow, who seems to think that he ought to apologise for having made no attempt to cultivate my acquaintance earlier, but pleads that circumstances and our long residence abroad have been to blame for that. Perhaps 'circumstances' means a pardonable disinclination on his part to seek out poor relations. We are cousins, he says."

"Yes; your father was his first cousin. I remember

meeting him years ago, when he was a Cabinet Minister and a great personage. I am sure I must often have mentioned him to you as the head of the family, but it never occurred to me that he would be likely to take any notice of us. Of course you can't mean that he literally offers to adopt you."

"He makes that offer in explicit terms and at great length. The property, it appears, is not entailed; yet, as I should be the next in succession to it if it were——"

"Oh, I see!" broke in Mrs. Hadlow, suddenly flushed and excited. "How extraordinary of me not to have thought of that before! He had three sons, but he has lost them all; I saw in the papers that the youngest had been killed in South Africa, just before the end of the war. So naturally——"

"Poor old fellow!" said Cyril.

"Yes, dreadfully sad for him; still I am sure he must

which no immediate equivalent could be offered. Still the county was not to be called dull, as counties went. Apart from the facilities for sport of various kinds which it afforded, it had charms of colour and outline which could not but commend themselves to the artistic eye, and there were neighbours of a more or less lively disposition within easy reach. At any rate, he was sure his correspondent would agree with him in thinking that the heir to a property, like the heir to a throne, should, if possible, familiarise himself with the aspects and conditions of his inheritance before entering upon it, and although the process might prove irksome and tedious in some respects, it would at least bring the incidental reward which attaches to all charitable actions, inasmuch as it would infuse an atmosphere of youth and cheerfulness into lives which had lost touch with both.

“Sir Martin is a trifle long-winded,” observed Mrs. Hadlow, when she had come to the end of two closely written sheets; “but he sounds as if he had quite made up his mind.”

“Oh, he has quite made up his mind.”

“He seems to know a good deal about you, too.”

“Yes, he has evidently instituted inquiries, and the upshot of them has evidently caused him some uneasiness. Satisfactory as to character and conduct, he would think, but doubtful in the matter of habits and tastes. A man of seven-and-twenty who has wandered about the Continent ever since he left school, who has scarcely any friends but foreigners and no pursuits except art!—that doesn’t give the impression of very promising material for the evolution of a country squire.

Squiredom is one's destined part, I presume. Or are the estates so extensive as to raise one to the level of a territorial magnate?"

Mrs. Hadlow made no immediate response. Her faded blue eyes appeared to be scanning the ugly red-brick houses on the opposite side of Royal Avenue, the intervening bare boughs and the swirling dust which was being driven westwards by a keen February wind; but in truth her gaze was fixed upon a prospect far more pleasing and inspiring. Ah, what a prospect!—and how unlike that grim, grey, nebulous one which it had so abruptly displaced! Clear was it to her that her poor old kinsman was not long for this world; soon would Cyril be reigning in his stead—Cyril, who, if he had given his mother many an anxious hour, had at least never been lacking in filial or fraternal affection, and whose careless liberality was a byword. Farewell to parsimony! Farewell to hateful,

beatific vision she was recalled by a renewal of Cyril's query.

"The estates?" she repeated vaguely. "Really I can't tell you, but I fancy that Sir Martin must be very well off. Let us look him up in the 'Landed Gentry.'"

The bookcase to which she had recourse did not contain that useful work of reference; but a red volume, somewhat remote in date, furnished a few particulars which she proceeded to read aloud in a murmuring voice, amplifying them with explanatory comments.

"' *Hadlow*, rt. hon. Sir Martin, P.C., G.C.S.I., born 1831, married 1860 Lady Constantia, daughter of 4th Earl of Tilehurst'—I remember being introduced to her by your poor father, a tall woman in ruby velvet and dirty diamonds, who was rather uncivil in her manner, I thought—' D.L. and J.P., Devonshire, Under Secretary for the Home department, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster,' and so forth, and so forth. Then they made him an Indian Governor, and that's how he got his G.C.S.I. It was on his return to England, I think, that he succeeded to the property; but the book doesn't say. '*Seat*: Kingsmoreton Court, Kingsmoreton, Devon. Has issue: (1) Martin, late captain Grenadier Guards'—broke his neck in a steeplechase long ago—'(2) Spencer, M.P. for Kingsmoreton division'—ah, that's the one who died of pneumonia last year—(3) 'Reginald, lieutenant 22nd Hussars'—yes, it was Reginald who was shot in South Africa. I have an indistinct impression that he wasn't altogether satisfactory. Ran into debt or something. Not that it

matters now. 'Patron of five livings'—h'm! that ought to imply a considerable number of acres, one would think. Anyhow, whether the rent-roll amounts to five thousand a year or fifty thousand, it's a splendid windfall."

"I suppose it must be called so," the heir-elect agreed a little dubiously. "At any rate, I suppose I mustn't decline to pick it up."

For a moment Mrs. Hadlow experienced the sensations of Alnaschar when he kicked over his basket of glassware and awoke from dreams of affluence to find himself penniless. Cyril, she knew, was capable of that monstrous renunciation. He was capable of great things, unaccountable things, insensate things, all manner of things. She had seldom been able to understand him, although he had often compelled her to admire him. But she did feel that he would forfeit all claim upon her admiration for ever if he should be

"that you don't care for field sports. English people are so apt to be prejudiced against men who neither hunt nor shoot."

Cyril shrugged his shoulders lightly. "If that were all, the outlook wouldn't be particularly formidable. Anybody, I imagine, can learn to shoot by taking a little trouble, and I already know how to ride—after a fashion. I have surmounted greater difficulties than those before now by taking trouble. There are other things, though, which can neither be learnt nor unlearnt, I'm afraid."

"But you needn't obtrude them," Mrs. Hadlow urged quickly.

"My political, social and religious opinions? No; perhaps not."

"Besides, Sir Martin is a Liberal."

"He would have to be an uncommonly advanced one to join hands with me. But never mind; I'll try to be discreet. I'll try, in short, to fulfil what looks like my manifest destiny. The situation is hardly what I should have chosen; but I accept it—since I am going to accept it—without reserve."

"Then you'll succeed," Mrs. Hadlow declared, with a sigh which this time betokened relief, not misgiving. "I must say for you, Cyril, that you always succeed in what you are determined to do."

"One can *do* things when one is determined," the young man assented. "Whether one can *be* something that one isn't is perhaps another question. But, as I tell you, I'll try."

He was in truth no bad hand at trying, and had proved his capacity for achieving results through

dogged perseverance after a fashion which justified his mother's praise and his own quiet self-reliance. If he could not as yet be said to have achieved success in his profession, that was because an unfortunate physical defect had compelled him to lay aside his painter's pallet, and because in these days fame and fortune are well-nigh impossible of attainment by wielders of the pencil or the etching-needle. From his earliest boyhood he had shown such an overwhelming passion for the pictorial art that his desire to adopt it as a means of livelihood had triumphed over the reluctance of parents and guardians, and before his father's death he had been sent abroad to complete an education which the ordinary course of public school and college training does not provide. Strange to say, it was not until his studies had been carried on in various foreign schools for some years that a discovery was made which had to be acknowledged as fatal to them so far

liable at any moment to introduce a green horse or a brown tree into a picture has no artistic future before him, and it was unhappily the case that Cyril had been known to confuse olive green with brown. At the outset he refused to be discouraged, persisting in the belief that by some mechanical system or other he could learn to counteract aberrations which were the more hard to deal with because they were not continuous, but appeared to be due to conditions of atmosphere or health. At length, however, after much labour and many fruitless consultations with oculists, he was forced to own himself beaten. By that time he was almost past the age for fresh starts; his mother was a widow with a small income; the very few hundreds a year which he had inherited on attaining his majority barely sufficed to feed and clothe him; it was most desirable that he should replenish the family exchequer, out of the question for him to become a burden upon it. Probably, therefore, he was wise in deciding to utilise his undeniable skill as a draughtsman for what it might be worth.

Pecuniarily, it did not prove to be worth a great deal. Still he earned a trifle here and there, and when he finally took up etching, throwing himself heart and soul into a craft which has never had many devotees of first-rate ability, a certain modest measure of celebrity began to be his recompense. He shared the home, or rather the succession of homes, which his mother, seeking economy and education for her children, set up for herself in France and elsewhere; he led, upon the whole, a pleasant life, and was ever the pleasantest of company, sustained by a brave optimism which forbade

him to repine over what could not be helped. He was a good son and a good brother. He formed, it was true, certain intimacies and assimilated certain views of which his mother could not approve; but she said to herself that the natural effervescence of youth must needs find an outlet in one direction or another, and that, after all, there are many more troublesome ones than the theoretical Socialism, or whatever it was, that Cyril was pleased to profess. Nor did she now feel much disquietude as to the effect of such eccentric convictions upon his future. Sir Martin was sure to like Cyril. Everybody liked Cyril, while nobody took his occasional wild pronouncements literally.

"Well," she remarked, as she rose from her chair, "I little thought when I came down to breakfast what luck was in store for us! Oh yes, I know what you are going to say; but really they *are* hatched to all intents and purposes, and even if they weren't, I

materials of his calling. No one cared less about wealth than he did; no one minded less being poor. What he did mind was the surrender of his independence, and it is highly probable that he would have declined to make that surrender at Sir Martin's bidding, had he had his own wishes alone to consult. As matters stood, he felt that he had no alternative but to despatch a grateful and graceful reply to his would-be benefactor.

CHAPTER II

THE HEIR AND HIS WELCOME

ABOUT a fortnight later Cyril arrived at the wayside station of Kingsmoreton, after a six hours' journey from London, and stepped into the brougham which had been sent to meet him. Further correspondence with Sir Martin Hadlow had made it perfectly clear that he was desired and intended to regard himself as that gentleman's heir, although he was still in some doubt, and had not liked to ask point-blank, whether he was about to be received as a guest or as a permanent

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London it had been cold, raw and wintry; but down here in the soft West, spring was already beginning to announce itself. The larches and the hedgerows showed tips of vivid green, the gorse upon the hillsides was golden, the banks of the deep lanes, through which Cyril was driven at a rapid pace, were decked with early wild-flowers, and every now and then he caught a glimpse of blue sea and red cliffs, fired by the setting sun. As far as natural beauty went—and it went a long way with him—he would evidently have little to grumble at. And when the carriage, passing under a stone archway, entered upon wide spaces of park land, broken by rhododendron thickets, a cry of surprised admiration escaped its occupant. For Kingsmoreton Court, unlike the majority of west-country mansions, stands superbly on a height and displays its fine Jacobean front to the advancing visitor from a distance of a mile or more. A noble, weather-beaten building, rising above two broad, grassy terraces or bowling-greens, flanked by shrubberies, and dominating distant Kingsmoreton, which, with the harbour and the sea, is visible from its upper storeys, although Cyril, craning his neck out of the window of the brougham, could descry only the bluish film of smoke which hung above the little town. Well; he thought to himself, this was certainly a place worth possessing—if indeed any such place could be, from his point of view, worth possessing. It was, at any rate, worth sketching. Never before in his life had he seen anything quite like it outside a picture-frame or a portfolio, and the spectacle gave him a thrill of sheer joy, such as

he had hitherto associated only with cathedrals and mountain ranges.

In a few minutes he was at the entrance, and folding doors, flung wide, revealed a hall of vast proportions, oak-panelled, thickly carpeted, and warmed by a great fire of blazing logs. He had a general impression of wealth, luxury, stateliness, numerous servants, followed by a sharper and more definite sense of his personal incongruity in relation with such adjuncts. Then he found himself advancing into a comparatively small library or study and shaking hands with a white-haired, refined-looking old man, who said :

“Conventionalities apart, I am very glad to see you. Is it too late to offer you a cup of tea? You don't care for tea? Sit down, then, and smoke a cigarette with me while they unpack your things. Dinner is at eight.”

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wanted it to tell. He was an old man and an old office-holder, who had his sentiments well under control, and who was naturally less inclined towards swift conclusions than a young artist. Probably, however, it did not take him long to discover that his cousin was a gentleman, and probably that was as much as he cared to ascertain at the outset.

"Yes, I thought you would appreciate the house," he said, in answer to an enthusiastic remark of Cyril's; "of its class it is as nearly perfect as any that I know. Like the surrounding district," he added, with a faint smile, "it suffers a little just now from being insufficiently peopled; but it has seen merry times, and will see them again, I daresay. Unfortunately, these new death-duties are playing the very deuce with country gentlemen. Or don't you agree that that is a misfortune?"

Cyril had the prudence to reply that he hardly felt competent to express an opinion as yet. Not in a first interview could he proclaim his intransigent Radicalism, whatever honesty might compel him to avow later.

He was not pressed. Sir Martin changed the theme, chatted agreeably about art, of which he seemed to have some knowledge, about the modern French school, about etchings, engravings, mezzotints, and so forth, but did not make the most distant allusion to the circumstances under which Cyril had become his guest or to the correspondence which had passed between them. It was quite distinctly as a guest that he was being treated, Cyril felt, when, after a time, he was conducted upstairs to a spacious bedroom, where he

was left to dress for dinner. He began to doubt whether his mother and his sisters had not been a little premature in bidding him farewell with tears.

Punctually on the stroke of eight he descended the broad oak staircase, at the foot of which a grave personage in black—butler or groom of the chambers or some such functionary—appeared to be waiting for him. “Her ladyship is in the saloon to-night, sir,” this imposing being announced; whence Cyril drew the rapid deductions that her ladyship did not use the saloon every night, that she was doing so now because she wished him to understand that he was a stranger, and consequently that she was thus far no consenting party to her husband’s scheme. The sight of the saloon, a long, tapestried chamber, illuminated by wax candles in crystal chandeliers, confirmed his

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that, but, dropping stiffly into a chair, pointed to a rather distant one.

"Please sit down," said she.

Cyril obeyed, inwardly resolving that the next advance should come from her, if he had to remain mute for a quarter of an hour. He was made to wait fully two minutes (which, under certain circumstances, is almost tantamount to fifteen) before she spoke again, and when she did so, it was to put a startlingly disconcerting question.

"What made you come down here?" she asked.

"Well—I was invited," Cyril replied, with a smile.

"Yes; of course."

There was another pause; after which Lady Constantia resumed: "I did not mean to be rude. I quite understand your having accepted my husband's offer to treat you as his heir; no one would have refused such an offer, and it was proper that it should be made. I was only wondering what attraction this dull, sad house could have for you."

Cyril might have answered that he had not known how dull and sad it was; or he might have signified his willingness to leave it from the moment that his presence was unwelcome; or again he might have mentioned that the offer made to him had not related to heirship alone. But he said none of these things; for he could not help perceiving that Lady Constantia, if unmistakably hostile, really did not mean to be rude. She did not want him, that was all, and did not see what motive he could have for intruding upon the settled melancholy with which her whole aspect

was instinct. He began to be sorry for the stern, unhappy-looking woman, and, although he could think of no rejoinder which would be likely to mollify her, he refrained from uttering any that could have the contrary effect.

“Such a house as this,” he remarked at length, “is bound to be attractive to me, because I am an artist, and because it is so beautiful. I could live in it for a week without seeing a soul and be quite contented.”

“Oh,” returned Lady Constantia, staring at the fire, “could you? But perhaps by the end of a week you will have seen enough of it.”

Again Cyril found himself on the brink of laughter; but at this juncture, to his great relief, Sir Martin entered, and instantly the grim features of his terrible interlocutress relaxed. Her voice, too, had quite another and a softer intonation as she addressed her

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ought to have known that you are not a mere visitor ; but she shall be told. Meanwhile, I don't regret the opportunity of showing you how well these old tapestries light up."

Soon a door at the further extremity of the long room was thrown open and dinner was announced ; but neither Sir Martin nor Lady Constantia moved, although the latter gazed at the fire with compressed lips and a deepening frown. For whom, Cyril wondered, could they be waiting? Who could be so sublimely audacious as to make that fearsome old woman wait?

The culprit who, after the lapse of a few more minutes, gratified his curiosity by making her appearance did not at first sight convey an impression of striking audacity. She was a tiny lady, whose fair hair was arranged in the most recent style, who was charmingly dressed in pale lavender brocade, and who wore three rows of large pearls round her slim, white throat. She was not remarkably pretty, nor perhaps (but this was uncertain even under a strong light) very young ; but she was undeniably smart, graceful in her movements, and self-possessed. These details the observant Cyril had time to take in before Sir Martin said :

"Let me introduce you to my daughter-in-law, Mrs. Spencer Hadlow."


Mrs. Spencer gave the stranger a careless glance from beneath her lowered eyelids, bowed slightly, smiled more slightly still, and, taking Sir Martin's arm, rustled off towards the dining-room.

"Another enemy!" thought Cyril, as he followed,

with Lady Constantia's fingers just touching his sleeve. "At this rate, the sooner I own myself defeated and beat a retreat the better!"

But to own himself defeated was never what he liked, and the very fact that the task in store for him threatened to prove more arduous than he had anticipated made him disinclined to relinquish it. After all, it was not he who had forced himself upon these people, and if it was admitted, as it appeared to be, that he ought to inherit the estates, there was much to be said in favour of his acquainting himself with them.

When the four took their places at a small round table in an immense dining-room, Mrs. Spencer, who spoke in a rather drawling, but not unmusical voice, was vainly trying to convince her father-in-law that all the clocks in the establishment were fast.



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Lady Constantia vouchsafed no rejoinder. Indeed, she only opened her lips twice again in the course of a quickly-served meal, and on both occasions it was to urge her husband to eat something which he had refused. For him she had another voice; upon him, when she spoke to him, her great, woebegone black eyes rested and grew soft. As for her daughter-in-law and Cyril, she simply ignored their presence. The latter, watching her and listening to the conversation between Sir Martin and Mrs. Spencer, into which he was but occasionally drawn, took mental notes and thought he could discern the general lie of the land. Poor Lady Constantia, bereaved of her three sons, caring for nobody and nothing now in the wide world save her husband, but caring intensely for him, would naturally hate the thought that his broad acres and his magnificent old dwelling must pass ere long into the hands of strangers; naturally, therefore, she must hate the sight of his destined successor. It was, perhaps, little less natural, if somewhat less excusable, that she should detest her daughter-in-law—she obviously did detest her daughter-in-law—for being childless. Mrs. Spencer was shielded from ocular scrutiny by a high silver bowl, in which was piled up a pyramid of hothouse flowers; but a listener with Cyril's swift perceptions and acute sense of hearing might divine that some of her bland, languid speeches were directed at, if not to, the morose lady who disdained to notice them, and were less innocent in intention than they sounded. He surmised that there were sharp claws at the end of Mrs. Spencer's velvety paws; he also surmised that

a peace-loving old gentleman, flanked by two women who were ever ready to clash, might be willing to offer a high price, pecuniary or other, in return for the more or less protecting company of one of his own sex.

“Hang it!” reflected Cyril, “I’ll see the poor old chap through, if I can. It’s what I am here for, unless I am much mistaken.”

He was sometimes mistaken, though not so often as to shake his confidence in an insight which was fairly quick and exact. After dinner, when the small party adjourned to the library, he continued his part of an intelligent observer, and found Mrs. Spencer, upon the whole, the most interesting of his three subjects, because she was rather enigmatic. About her lips there hovered perpetually a queer little smile, half demure, half ironical; she kept her eyes always half shut, which rendered her face more difficult to read;

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tarily immersed, and Mrs. Spencer slipped out of the room.

Precisely at half-past ten a move was made to the hall, where bedroom candles were lighted, and where Mrs. Spencer reappeared, bringing with her a faint but indubitable aroma of cigarette smoke. She accepted a candlestick from Cyril, while Sir Martin and Lady Constantia were holding a short confabulation apart, and, looking him in the face for the first time (her eyes were of a greenish grey hue, he noticed)—

“Isn't it deadly?” she whispered.

The young man laughed under his breath, but did not commit himself to a verbal assent. “Is it always like this?” he ventured to ask.

“Always, except when Mr. Pickering, the parish parson, dines and makes up a rubber. Poor you! But I daresay you have courage and patience.”

“I must try to take you for my model,” said Cyril.

“You had better not; you might arrive at some rather odd results that way. I am glad you recognise that I set a fine example in the face of high trials, though. Good-night.”

Sir Martin led his guest off to a cheerful smoking-room and gave him an excellent cigar. He said:

“I wonder whether I ought to apologise. I tried to prepare you; but you probably find us more depressing than you expected. Still, there will be compensations, I hope. Do you like the look of your sitting-room?”

“My sitting-room?” echoed Cyril.

“You didn't know that you had one? It opens out

of your bedroom, and I think it should be large enough and light enough to be used as a studio. If not, there are plenty of other rooms at your disposal. Please give your orders to the servants as if you were at home. Or rather, please understand that you *are* at home. That is what we wish."

That might be Sir Martin's wish, but assuredly it was not Lady Constantia's, Cyril thought. However, he only said, "It is very good of you."

"Of course," Sir Martin went on, "you will want a little time to shake down. The duties of a country squire, simple as they sound, require learning when one has not been brought up to them."

"I am afraid I shall be a square peg in a round hole," Cyril felt bound to own.

"Oh, pegs can be rounded so as to fit the place for them, unless they are too small, and, if I may say so, you don't strike me as being small. Otherwise I might



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given us some anxiety, and she thought she had been too hard upon him: but I need not go into all that. What frightens me is that when I die she will be absolutely alone, and, between ourselves, my life hangs by a thread. I have a disease of the heart which is as likely as not to snuff me out from one moment to another. Since we lost Reggie she has ceased to hold any intercourse with the outer world. I should like to have people to stay with us sometimes, but she has made that practically impossible, and, of course, a woman of her age who shuts herself up is soon forgotten by her relations and friends. Do you understand?"

"I think I understand," answered Cyril slowly, "but——"

"Yes, yes; she hasn't taken to you at first sight, you mean; it was scarcely to be expected that she would. But will you, like a good fellow, be forbearing, and bide your time? And will you please bear in mind that nothing must be said to her about South Africa or the Boer War? Personally, I am not pained by such allusions: my poor lad met his death gallantly, like a gentleman, and perhaps being so near my own end makes me less sensitive than I should be if I were younger. But to her the whole subject is unbearable; so we have been obliged to put it on the forbidden list. You'll remember, will you?"

Cyril promised to do so. He also promised, in response to further entreaties, that he would do what in him lay to grapple with the unforeseen and very unpromising mission confided to him. He could not but suspect, however, that he might almost as well have been invited to propitiate a tigress, nor was he able

to credit Sir Martin with much knowledge of feminine nature in general, or of Lady Constantia's in particular. He took up to bed with him at length a chastened conviction of inadequacy, together with an increased interest in this so palpably complicated household.

CHAPTER III

HINTS FOR THE NEOPHYTE

It is a well-established axiom in affairs of the heart that a lover who casts himself abjectly at the feet of an obdurate mistress must expect to be trampled upon for his pains, and perhaps what is true of victims of the tender passion applies also to those who only seek to overcome an elderly lady's prejudices. Cyril, at all events, judged that fair words were likely to avail him little in making headway with Lady Constantia, and his determination to open the campaign by taking no more notice of her than he could help did not falter when he came down to breakfast the next morning and found her seated behind the urn, grave and alone. Sir Martin, she announced, was not feeling very well and had been persuaded to rest for another hour or two. Her tone seemed to imply that her husband's indisposition might be in some way due to the advent of a fresh inmate in the house; but the intruder resisted an inclination to apologise.

"Adela," she went on, "always breakfasts in her bedroom. It is one of her disgusting habits. Please help yourself; there are hot dishes on the sideboard."

"Are Mrs. Spencer Hadlow's habits disgusting?" inquired Cyril, doing as he was bidden.

Lady Constantia's solemn black eyes rested for a moment upon her questioner, who did not flinch beneath their scrutiny. "I think them so," she answered curtly. "It is a matter of opinion, no doubt."

Then followed a long period of silence, during which her ladyship munched dry toast and contemplated space. Eventually she resumed:

"Sir Martin wished me to tell you that a horse will be saddled for you at any hour you like. Or you can have a dogcart if you prefer it. He had intended to take you to the home farm and show you a part of the estate this morning; but one of the grooms will go with you."

"I would rather wait until Sir Martin feels better, thanks," answered Cyril. "What I should like best would be to go out for a walk presently and explore the neighbourhood on my own account."

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rose when he had found his hat and stick, had lighted a pipe and was marching briskly across the grassy slopes and hollows of the park in the direction of the town, which he had decided upon as the best object for preliminary investigation. It was a brilliantly sunny day; the sky was of an almost Italian blue; the air, though soft by comparison with the harsh, grey atmosphere of London, had a touch of crispness in it, and a missel-thrush was singing lustily somewhere in the adjoining woods. Like the philosopher that he occasionally was, Cyril dismissed worries and problems from his mind to give himself up to the enjoyment of his senses.

For any one who was prepared to adopt that wise course Kingsmoreton had ample rewards to supply. A gentle descent of a mile and a half, or thereabouts, brought the explorer within sight of the wooded valley down which the little river 'Tavy winds a leisurely course towards the sea. Beneath him, on either bank of the broadening estuary, a jumble of white cottages, thatched roofs and paths of extraordinary steepness, paved with cobble-stones, dropped to the water's edge; beyond them was a sheltered harbour, at the quays of which one or two coasting schooners of antiquated build appeared to be discharging cargo, and beyond that again, glittering in the sunshine, and ruffled by a light breeze, stretched the open sea, whither a small fleet of trawlers with red-brown sails was just putting forth. Cyril's hand dipped instinctively into the bulging pocket of his loose coat, wherein a sketch-book always lurked. But upon second thoughts he preferred to walk on and make closer acquaintance

with this quaint picturesque congeries of human dwellings, which amounted to something more than a village and was, as a matter of fact, a market town, boasting of some five thousand inhabitants together with a Mayor and a Town Hall, besides giving its name to a Parliamentary division and offering, down on the beach below its eastern headland, attractions to summer visitors in the shape of six bathing-machines and a hideous little stucco-faced hotel of recent construction.

Kingsmoreton, on nearer inspection, might have been cleaner, might have been less redolent of fish, and would have been more agreeable to a pedestrian if its precipitous streets, degenerating in places into sheer stairways, had not been so cruelly paved. Also it seemed a pity that municipal prudence was visibly banishing thatched roofs in favour of cold, grey slates. Red tiles, Cyril thought, would have saved the situa-

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heights once more, getting quite hot in the process. He promised himself that he would pay Kingsmoreton another visit soon; for the time being he was not sure whether he ought not to go back to the Court, in case Sir Martin should be looking for him.

But as there was no sign of Sir Martin or anybody else in the library or the hall when he returned, he strolled out on to the terrace and, seating himself on the granite balustrade which divided it from the upper bowling-green, began to make a rapid sketch of the great sunlit building, with its jutting wings, its clustered chimneys, its mullioned windows and the abundant creepers which added to its charm in one sense, if they somewhat marred the symmetry of its lines. He had been thus occupied for nearly half an hour when Mrs. Spencer Hadlow, smartly attired in a costume of French grey, emerged from a side door and approached him.

“Good morning,” said she, nodding in a friendly and familiar manner. “Well, how are you getting on?”

The young man rose, and took off his hat. “Rather badly, thank you,” he answered. “It is one of the hardest things in the world to get the general effect of masses of masonry like this in a few strokes. I haven’t managed to get it a bit.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of the picture,” she returned, “but let’s see the picture.”

She held out her hand for the sketch-book and examined his work, with her head on one side, for a minute. “Now I should call that extraordinarily good and clever,” was her verdict, “but you probably despise the praise of an ignoramus.”

"Not when it is sincere," replied Cyril, smiling: for he knew that hers could not be that, inasmuch as what he had accomplished so far must needs leave anybody save an expert cold.

She laughed a little. Laughter enhanced her attractiveness, for she had good teeth and a dimple at one corner of her mouth. Furthermore, it became certain in that strong light that, whatever else might or might not be genuine about her, her complexion was a birthright.

"Anyhow," she returned, "I am sincerely curious to hear how you are getting on with the inside of the house. I should think you might find that a rather harder nut to crack than the outside."

"You didn't give me much help towards breaking the shell last night," Cyril observed.

"Not very much, did I? But you see, in the first

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and I wish you well—if that were any use. It isn't though."

"You think that I am foredoomed to failure, then?"

"That depends upon what you attempt. I warn you that you will do no good with my mother-in-law."

"Sir Martin hopes that I shall be like a son to her," observed Cyril, smiling ruefully.

Mrs. Spencer broke forth into a peal of laughter. "Oh no!—you don't mean that he told you that? How inimitable of him!" And then with an air of pensive compassion, "Poor old cockatoo!"

"Perhaps he is ridiculous, but he doesn't strike me that way," said Cyril. "And he is more than kind."

"Oh, he is a dear! I'm devoted to him, though he has no great affection for me. But it is rather funny of him to suppose that sons can be supplied like clothes or groceries—come! Suppose you had lost what you cared for most in the world, how would you like it if somebody were to pat you on the head and say, 'Well, never mind! Don't cry and I'll get you another one'?"

"Did Lady Constantia care more for her youngest son than anybody else in the world?"

"I doubt whether she cared much about any of her sons. As for Reggie, the truth is that he was a bad lot, and she never concealed her contempt for him. But that doesn't make her less inconsolable or less determined to end her days in a wilderness. The very utmost that you will ever get from her will be toleration. Whether she will get that from you is a rather interesting question."

"My present feeling," said Cyril, after meditating for

a moment, "is that I am going to have a good try. I owe as much as that to Sir Martin, who I believe really wants me to stay. Besides, as I told you last night, your example will be an encouragement to me. Probably you find the atmosphere of this place even more uncongenial than I shall; yet you manage to live here."

"Bless your soul, I don't live here!—Heaven forbid! I only come down from time to time to stay with the old people. That's my invincible good nature."

"I should think you were good-natured," observed Cyril, surveying her with a smile.

"Thank you. Now let me make a bid for a still higher place in your esteem, by confessing honestly that I have another motive for doing periodical penance. A motive which is of interest to my banker and my unconscionable, but unequalled dressmaker. I can't find

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"Do you address her as 'Constantia'?" inquired Cyril wonderingly.

"Do I look—does she look—as if such a thing could be remotely possible? No; I have never, that I can remember, called her anything but 'you.' I couldn't presume to call her 'mother,' and 'Lady Constantia' would be absurd, so she remains anonymous."

"But appreciative?"

"Of my costume? Well, she would be, if she saw it, and that's why I don't mean her to set eyes upon me to-day."

"Aren't you going to appear at luncheon, then?" asked Cyril, a little disappointed.

"In this hat? How you give yourself away by asking such a question! No, I am going to lunch at Mannington with your future wife."

"Who is my future wife, please?" inquired the young man, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, I don't say that she is inevitable. There's always the possibility of your breaking down and cutting the whole show. But supposing you do stand manfully to your guns and accept what you are asked to accept, Mabel Penrose looks like an almost necessary consequence. She is the only child of old Mr. Penrose of Mannington, who is the M.F.H. and the second biggest personage hereabouts. He will approve; so will Sir Martin; and so, most likely, will she herself, provided you make some concessions to her sporting tastes."

"I am afraid I may fail to give satisfaction in that respect. Is she pretty?"

"That's what you will have to tell me when you have seen her. I never know whether girls are pretty

or not until I have heard what men think of them. But she is very nice."

"I am glad of that, anyhow," Cyril remarked. "But why am I to marry her, I wonder?"

"Only because she is so clearly indicated—though, to be sure, that may have the effect of putting you off. Did I hear wheels?"

And at this juncture a footman coming out of the house to announce that the carriage was at the door, the little lady moved away, with a parting nod and a wave of the hand.

Cyril devoutly wished that she had offered to take him with her; a wish which became intensified when he entered the library shortly afterwards, and when Lady Constantia, who was writing letters, looked round for a moment to mention that Sir Martin was still too unwell to come downstairs. Presently, however, to his great relief, a second *tête-à-tête* was averted by the advent of

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"You are a bridge player, no doubt," observed the Rector. "Well, I'm rather fond of a game of bridge myself; only it's as much as my place is worth to say so in this house. We are desperately conservative here, though some of us call ourselves Liberal Unionists."

"You don't," returned Lady Constantia, with the ghost of a smile; "you have been a malignant Tory all your life."

Cyril subsequently discovered that political topics were amongst the very few that moved her to intermittent interest. In her far-away youth she had been an ardent politician, and every now and then it was still possible to rouse a spark by stirring those dead embers of the past. Doubtless the worthy Mr. Pickering was aware of that, and had spoken with intention. While disposing of a hearty luncheon he contrived to keep conversation alive, although he could not induce his two neighbours to address one another directly. Lady Constantia evidently liked him; she grew perceptibly more human under his mellowing influence; once or twice he even succeeded in getting a short, rather unmirthful laugh out of her. When she retired—which she did as soon as the coffee was brought in—he said half deprecatingly:

"I have known our good friends here for the best part of forty years. Naturally, you can never know them as well as I do; still I hope it may not be very long before you realise how excellent they both are, in spite of some surface roughnesses."

"I don't think anybody could accuse Sir Martin of being rough," said Cyril.

Mr. Pickering laughed. "Of course not," he agreed.

"I only used the plural number because he is to some extent answerable for singularities which you must have noticed. He has been in rather too great a hurry, perhaps; it doesn't follow that a man is at the point of death because he has had two or three attacks of angina pectoris. However, he chooses to take it for granted he is doomed; so, with the best intentions in the world, he makes it difficult for his wife to treat you civilly at the outset."

"Her daughter-in-law has been explaining that to me," observed Cyril.

"She has, eh? Clever, agreeable woman, Mrs. Spencer; but——"

"But what?" Cyril inquired when he stopped short.

"But it is a thousand pities she has no children," went on Mr. Pickering, whose sentence may not have been originally intended to end in that way. "Her

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"Perhaps you are a bachelor," Cyril smilingly suggested.

"I have the misfortune to be a widower, which is probably neither here nor there. But I am a High Church parson, and I think it my duty to hear confessions when I am asked. That is why I know something about women, and why I have the highest esteem and respect for Lady Constantia, who, as an old-fashioned Evangelical, thinks I ought to be burnt at the stake. Shall we join her now, or would you rather make your escape?"

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll leave the risk of immediate martyrdom to you," answered Cyril, laughing. "I don't think my absence is likely to be resented."

"To tell you the truth, I don't think it is. All will come right in time, you'll see. At the bottom of her heart she wouldn't like to burn either my body or yours, and if you find your ears burning presently, you will know that it is because I am giving you a good character. Look me up one of these days when you are near the Rectory and haven't anything better to do. I may be able to be of use to you in some ways, if you will allow me."

CHAPTER IV

THE RECTOR'S RABBITS

WHEN Cyril had spent ten days at Kingsmoreton Court, he was able to post a reassuring despatch to his mother, from whom he had heard twice, and who was pardonably eager to be reassured. What afforded him sincere pleasure, and was likely to do as much for the recipient of his letter, was that he could enclose in it a substantial remittance. Sir Martin had large ideas respecting the pecuniary allowance to which heirs-presumptive are entitled, and in making known his

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reluctant Lady Constantia, that I am a fixture. You need not be afraid of my compromising a future which is of course brilliant in a material sense and to which I was resolved from the first to reconcile myself. I am behaving very nicely; I go to church on Sundays, with the mental reservations of Naaman the Syrian, and am careful not to incur the suspicion of moral leprosy by saying how the stark feudalism which prevails hereabouts startles and shocks me. Nobody would have the vaguest notion of what I could possibly mean if I did; so that makes it the more easy to hold one's tongue. Nobody, that is, expect Mrs. Spencer Hadlow, who understands all that is said to her and a good deal that isn't. She and I have made friends upon a common basis of suppressed insubordination, and find one another useful and comforting as safety-valves when we are out of other people's hearing. She is away just now on a visit, but is to return shortly, I am glad to say. What I shall do when she betakes herself to London, where she lives, I can't think. Meanwhile, my education progresses, and I begin to see what is demanded of the kind of person that I am to be—the kind of person that I am, for the present, so lamentably far from being!

“You were right about field sports. They are indispensable, and if the love of them can't be acquired, some show or pretence of it must. Consequently, I have already been out hunting, escorted and instructed by Sir Martin, who, on account of his weak heart, is no longer allowed to follow the hounds, but who knows the country so well that he and his cob generally contrive to see a good deal of every run. Even his

never-failing politeness could not carry him quite the length of praising my horsemanship, though it prevented him from ascribing my courage (which he did praise) to ignorance. He recommended me to leave my very sagacious and well-broken animal alone, which I accordingly did, with the gratifying result that I did not tumble off once, and witnessed the death of two foxes—a rather disgusting sight, if it were permissible to own what one thought of it. The only unlucky incident of this first day was that one of the hounds got under my horse's feet; whereupon Mr. Penrose, the Master, attacked me in language so extraordinarily insulting and blasphemous that self-respect would have compelled me to send him my seconds if we had been in any other country than England. However, everybody seemed to think it was all right, and afterwards he asked me to lunch. He is a jolly, red-faced old gentleman, who looks like a survival of the John Leech

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and proceeds to execute a cat-like scramble to the narrow top, slithering down somehow or other on the opposite side, while you sit precariously on his shoulders (at least I do) and lose both your stirrups. Then by a series of frantic acrobatic struggles you find your way back into the saddle and the chase is resumed. Bringing an impartial judgment to bear upon the pursuit of the fox, I recognise that it has features which would be exhilarating to most people; but I can't at present see the necessity for fox or hounds. It seems to me that scattered scraps of paper would answer all the purpose. I am sorry I said this to Sir Martin, though, as it evidently pained him.

"Shooting, happily, is at an end for this season; but Mr. Pickering, the Rector, with whom I have held sundry consultations, is of opinion that I ought to have some practice, in preparation for next autumn, and suggests that I should make a start by helping his factotum to keep down the rabbits, which, it appears, infest his small property on the outskirts of Kingsmoreton. The factotum, Jacob Beer by name, is a queer old fellow, with a face so exquisitely wrinkled that I burn to reproduce it in pen and ink, and I hope to obtain his consent to my doing so, provided that I ingratiate myself with him by slaying a sufficient number of rabbits. He assures me that it is impossible to miss them; but personally I should hesitate to set any limit to my capacity for failing to hit a moving object—or a stationary one either, for the matter of that."

The above excerpts will serve to show that if Cyril was, and was conscious of being, a good deal out of

harmony with his surroundings, he was animated by a commendable spirit in handling them. It may further be inferred that his efforts up to the time of writing had not gone wholly unrewarded, since they had earned him a perceptible measure of goodwill. Mr. Pickering, for one, had taken a decided fancy to the young man, whose instruction in the use of fire-arms he himself would gladly have superintended, had he not been very busy just then with Lenten services and the preparation of candidates for confirmation. He had, however, full confidence in Jacob Beer, who had for many years managed his small farm, and whose labours were not so heavy but that they could be varied at any time by a few hours' rabbiting. He was therefore somewhat surprised when, on the day appointed for the shoot, he climbed the hill after evensong in quest of the sportsmen and met old

nothing fur to pick up. Well, a didn't get no more rabbits, but a've killed both tu ferrets and a've shotted the old dog——”

“Shot old Ben?” ejaculated the Rector, aghast. “Good heavens! I wouldn't have had this happen for a five-pound note!”

“Ben havn't tuk no 'arm to siggerfy, bein' in coat just now, as luck would hev' it; but a was peppered proper, I tell 'ee! Next thing was—now what I'm tellin' of 'ee 's th' truth—a fired at a wood pigeon, loosed off both tu barr'ls at once, and come nigh knockin' hissself silly with th' stock. Aw, 'twas something crool! Shotted the boy tu—a's bliddin' all down 's trousers,” added Jacob as an afterthought.

“Mercy upon us! The boy isn't badly hurt, I hope?”

“No fear! What's not wanted 's niver lost, as I telled un. Sarve th' young varmint right fur not kapin' be'ind th' gun, same as I did. Though I reely shouldn't like to say as 'twas safe even then. Howsum-ever, th' young gen'leman give un a suv'rin, and a's that rackless I du b'lieve a'd stand up and be fired at agin fur another.”

“Well, you seem to have had a spirited time of it amongst you,” observed the Rector; “but we must be thankful that things are no worse. And what has become of this wholesale young murderer?”

“Gone up to Dr. Lee's with th' boy fur to 'ave th' pellets tuk out of un. Now I will say this, a more pleasanter-spoken young gen'leman I couldn't wish to meet; but I don't go out a rabbitin' with he no more, not for nothin' yu could offer me! An' if yu'll be

advised by me, passon, yu won't put a gun in 's 'and agin, not without yu'm sartain that there bain't no cartridge in it."

Mr. Pickering owned that the advice was sound. He added, "I think, Jacob, the less we say about to-day's work the better. I shouldn't like the Squire to hear of it."

The old man shook his head emphatically. "Squire shan't 'ear nowt from me, sir, an' if the boy don't keep 's mouth shut I'll twist th' neck of un. But somebody's got to warn Kaper afore next September for sartain sure. Lor', to think o' that theer young feller walkin' along in line or waitin' alongside a cover for somethin' to stir!—why, 'tis enough to fraze your blood!"

"Oh, of course. But I hope to make another man of him before the autumn. Meanwhile, I will take care that no more lives are endangered."

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"A little depends on whether they are held straight or not; still shot has a tendency to scatter, and many a man has lost his sight through a ricochet off a twig. I don't want to be uncivil, my dear fellow, but the fact is——"

"Oh, the facts would justify any amount of incivility. Fortunately, they can't be repeated, for I have been thinking it over, and I have quite made up my mind that I must abjure shooting."

"It's early days to say that. With a little patience and perseverance——"

"That's not what I mean. I'm patient and persevering, or I'm nothing, and it isn't the difficulty of learning to hold a gun straight that stops me, it's an invincible repugnance for the sport itself. I don't like killing things."

"I never should have supposed so after your exploits of to-day," remarked Mr. Pickering drily; "still, if you have conscientious objections to taking life, they must be respected."

"I don't know that my objections are conscientious. It may be all right to shoot pheasants and partridges and hares; I daresay it is. But I am not bound to be a butcher because it is all right to slaughter sheep and oxen."

"Not in the least; but I almost think you will be bound at some future time to preserve game, and at least invite your neighbours to shoot your birds for you."

"Of course I shall. It will be my clear duty to carry on established traditions and assimilate them to the best of my poor power. I can get up a sort of an

interest in Jerseys and Shorthorns; I am genuinely interested—a little too much so perhaps—in the agricultural labourer; I shall soon manage to ride to hounds as well as another, and I'm studying parish law and the education problem. I really am trying to qualify for my duties."

The Rector nodded. "Yes, I know you are, though some of them go rather against the grain."

"Ah, that's inevitable. Temperament and habit, you see, have made me an artist, and very little else; but by means of the patience and perseverance which you advocate I may turn myself into a colourable imitation of something else. I'm sorry about the shooting; still, it's as well to recognise what one's limitations are."

"It is as well to recognise that compromise is the mainspring of a smooth existence."

"Well, I'm prepared to compromise upon almost all

Noah's ark was precisely one of those subjects upon which you could make no mistake by keeping silence yet awhile. At all events, you won't be invited to make any pronouncement about it by Sir Martin, who has a broad mind, though he has never himself been troubled with doubts."

Cyril laughed. "Religion may be shirked, you mean; but how about politics?"

"Ah, there you get a field of controversy which simply bristles with compromises from the moment that it takes practical shape. In this country Republicanism isn't a practical question, so you can remain as uncompromising a Republican as you like without the slightest necessity for proclaiming your creed."

"Well, happily it doesn't seem to have entered into Sir Martin's plans to put me forward as a candidate for Parliament. Now I must go home and make humble avowal to him of the day's misdeeds."

"Don't do that, don't do that!" Mr. Pickering protested with some earnestness. "You will only distress him, and Jacob Beer has promised to keep mum."

"Oh, I must; I am certain to be asked. Besides, when Sir Martin hears how withering my fire has been, he may be reconciled to my leaving guns alone for the future. So, I am sure, must you and Jacob Beer be. By the way, when Jacob has forgiven me, I want him to give me a few sittings for his portrait. I am fabulously rich now, so I can afford to pay almost as much as it is worth for a face like his."

Mr. Pickering gazed at the young man's retreating figure and sighed rather wistfully. "Not a bad fellow," he mused, "not at all a bad fellow. We have caught him too late, though, I fear. The best thing he could do would be to fall in love with some nice, thoroughly English girl, like Mabel Penrose. But I don't suppose she would look at him; he isn't her sort at all."

Whether he was or was not "her sort," she had been placed at a disadvantage, so far as her prospects of captivating him went, by the indiscretion of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow. No man is likely to be predisposed in favour of a lady who has been selected for him by his well-wishers, nor had Cyril much inclination for matrimony in the abstract. On the occasion of their one meeting, however, he had paid the tribute of a dispassionate admiration to Miss Penrose, whose perfectly modelled figure showed to the best advantage

corner, a brown-paper parcel rolled out from between her feet and was rescued from the ditch by him. She pulled up, thanked him for restoring her property to her, and said :

"You are a friend in need. This horse won't stand, and I shouldn't have dared to get out with nobody to go to his head, so it's lucky you were there."

"Very glad I was," Cyril declared. "Have you been shopping?"

"Oh yes," she answered with a little sigh. "Somebody must do these things, and my father insists upon employing local tradesmen; but it's rather a waste of a fine afternoon. And how have you been spending it?"

"In disgracing myself," the young man ruefully replied.

Something about her—an undefinable suggestion of friendliness, the presence or absence of which in a stranger his quick sensibility always enabled him to detect—encouraged him to tell her the whole disastrous story, at which she laughed aloud.

"Well," she remarked, "there's nothing like taking one's calamities in the lump. You can hardly be so unfortunate next time."

"There isn't going to be a next time, though," said Cyril, who thereupon imparted to her the resolution which he had already announced to Mr. Pickering.

Miss Penrose was sorry to hear that. In a few words, she stated her view of the subject, which, as he had to acknowledge, was a common-sense one.

"Sport is cruel; I don't see any good in disputing that. Still it gives employment to a lot of people,

and keeps a lot more out of mischief. So long as you kill your birds clean——”

“Which I certainly shouldn't, if I hit them at all.”

“Ah, then, of course!—But everybody ought to begin by practising at a mark. And you must remember that if you cut these creatures' lives short, you give them their lives too. If there were no fox-hunting there would be no foxes, and if pheasants and partridges were not preserved they would very soon become extinct. Supposing you knew that you were to die at an early age, would you prefer never to have been born?”

“So far as it goes, that's a sound argument in favour of the game laws, which I wasn't attacking,” observed Cyril; “it doesn't affect my personal dislike to killing anything. However, I concede you your



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and, remembering this, it occurred to her that her words were open to misconstruction.

“Oh, we’re all interested in you,” she returned; “naturally we are.” Then, “You’re coming to lunch with us on Thursday, aren’t you?” she asked, and, gathering up her reins, drove away.

CHAPTER V

HOSPITABLE NEIGHBOURS

NOBODY to-day—or, at all events, only a minority too insignificant to be considered—wishes to abolish the heavy penalties inflicted upon the owners of land for dying. With an annual national expenditure approaching a hundred and forty millions and with a national distaste for indirect taxation which there seems to be no overcoming, those who neither possess nor expect to inherit land may be pardoned for viewing with tempered regret the inevitable disappearance of a class which

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house where he exercised a constant and cheerful hospitality. Without being rich, he was comfortably off, and of course, as some of his less fortunate neighbours were wont to remark with a sigh, there was no need for him, who had but one child and she a girl, to undertake the well-nigh impossible task of laying by something every year out of revenue.

Whether he esteemed himself more fortunate than they in that Providence had denied him male issue may be doubted: it would hardly have been in human nature for the representative of a line which had held the Mannington estates in fee simple for three centuries to account that a blessing. But nobody had ever heard him repine; whereas everybody within a twenty-mile radius had very frequently heard him sing the praises of a young lady who indeed had done a good deal to earn them. He did not say (although he thought) that she was far and away the best-looking girl in Devonshire; but he did say aloud that for sound sense, unfailing good temper, knowledge of horses and hounds and management of a household she had not her equal in that county or out of it. Sometimes he would add that if there was a man anywhere who deserved the luck of winning her for his wife, he had not come across that man yet.

However, he was growing old, and Mabel was out of her 'teens, and marry she must, he supposed. Of late, therefore, he had been asking himself whether the young fellow of whom poor Martin Hadlow had made choice to succeed him at Kingsmoreton was at all likely to prove suitable as a prospective son-in-law. That that young fellow should have opened acquaint-

ance with him by riding over one of his hounds was certainly an inauspicious incident; yet the culprit's frank confession that he knew nothing about the rules or customs of the hunting-field had mollified an old gentleman who could appreciate modesty and candour. Besides, he had rather liked Cyril's face and had noted that he was a bold rider, if an unskilled one. Something might surely be made of him, while it was probably no fault of his that his previous training had been carried on in foreign parts.

"Well, I'm glad I asked him to lunch," was the audible outcome of ruminations in which Mr. Penrose had been engaged at the breakfast-table. "We shall soon find out what he's fit for, and if he's fit for anything, we ought to be able to give him a helping hand. He must be in need of one, poor lad! I've known Martin Hadlow all my life, and a kinder soul doesn't

with dark eyes, a low, broad forehead, above which her hair grew very prettily, a short nose and rather full lips, which were generally curved into a smile. She could not compare in respect of looks with her sister Lady Tilehurst, and she often complained that that celebrated beauty drew all her most desirable admirers away from her; yet it was difficult to be in her company five minutes and believe in the literal truth of that assertion.

"Then all I can say, my dear," returned Mr. Penrose, "is that it's high time she gave up being anything of the sort. Why, the woman must be forty if she's a day! Gambles all night and smokes in her bedroom, too, I'm told. That's no way to get yourself adored by decent men, you may depend upon it."

Miss Violet, who was not herself wholly guiltless of either of the objectionable practices alluded to, was declaring that every woman, decent or indecent, smoked cigarettes now when Mabel hastily interrupted her by striking in with—

"Bob Luscombe and his mother are coming to lunch, too. Mrs. Luscombe wants you to advise her about Bob, father; she is afraid of his setting up a racing stable and ruining himself over it."

"She won't take my advice," Mr. Penrose predicted; "she never does. I shall advise her to give the fellow his head and let him learn wisdom by experience. Especially as he's of age and she can't stop him. But there isn't much use in talking sense to people who haven't got any. Young Luscombe knows the value of sixpence just as well as I do and a good deal better

than she does. He won't drop more than a few thousands at any game, I'll answer for it, and what are a few thousands to him?"

Violet sighed. "Just imagine the bliss of being able to lose several thousand pounds and never miss them! Who wouldn't be a red-haired booby at that price!"

"I hope I know who wouldn't sell herself to a red-haired booby at any price," remarked Mabel in a voice low enough to escape her father's ears, which were a trifle hard of hearing.

Mr. Penrose pushed back his chair and marched off, leaving the two girls to discuss, by no means for the first time, a question upon which there was scant probability of their ever agreeing. It is all very well to talk disdainfully about selling yourself when you are under no temptation to consider humiliating bargains; but suppose you are a homeless and all-but-incomeless

thousand solid recommendations *per annum* at his back.

He arrived a quarter of an hour before luncheon-time—a powerful, heavily-built youth whose square, underhung jaw and thin lips offered a somewhat puzzling contrast to his watery and projecting eyes. The upper portion of his face and head accounted at once for the unflattering epithet applied to him by Miss Ord; still there is no reason why a booby should not, upon occasion, be also a bully, and Mr. Luscombe's horses, could they have spoken, might have borne testimony to his being the latter. His mother, whose proud affection for him must surely have been sometimes mingled with wonder as to how on earth she had arrived at being his mother at all, bore no faintest trace of resemblance to him, being a timid, twittering mortal, prematurely old, unfeignedly pious and quite indifferent to the bounteous share of this world's gear allotted to her by Fate. Mr. Penrose, whose neighbourly counsels had been of some assistance to her during the long, anxious years of her Bob's minority, had often declared that she would ruin the lad with her alternating indulgence and fussiness; but Harrow and Cambridge (supplemented, no doubt, by some quality in the nature of their *alumnus* which was averse to anything so uncalled for as ruin) had preserved her from that; and here, for the confutation of pessimists, was the finished product, independent, masterful, capable (in certain directions) and, above all, marriageable.

It is true that Mrs. Luscombe, like Mr. Penrose, was confronted by the great difficulty of discovering

a mate worthy of her single chick ; but she was extremely anxious that he should marry, because, as everybody knows, the most dreadful things are liable to happen to bachelors of large means. Mabel would have suited her well enough ; only Bob, unfortunately, did not fancy Mabel. That he did undisguisedly fancy Violet Ord, a girl with whom his mother was barely acquainted, and about whose belongings faint echoes of scandal had filtered down from London to remote Devon, was now causing the good lady no slight searchings of heart. She wanted to like Violet, but was not at all sure that she did, and it must be confessed that that easily-bored young woman had been at small pains to cultivate friendly relations with her.

“I say, when are you going to try that mare of mine?” Bob began, striding across to the object of his affections, the moment that he had shaken hands with his host and hostess, and driving her before him into a

betting, and is it not a fact that owners of race-horses always do bet?"

"Not by any means always," answered Mr. Penrose, mentioning several well-known instances to the contrary. "It's a temptation, if you like, but, bless me! you don't suppose you can keep a young fellow of three-and-twenty exempt from temptations, do you?"

Mrs. Luscombe was diffidently of opinion that one ought at least to try; but all the comfort she obtained was an assurance that she might try until she was black in the face without getting any nearer to her end. Mr. Penrose took that opportunity of adding that if he had a son of his own, and if money were no object, he would a good deal rather see him go in for flat-racing than ride in local steeplechases against a lot of underbred competitors, mounted on underbred horses, and doing their level best at every meeting to steal a march upon the stewards.

He was still expatiating upon this theme, which was a rather sore one with him, when Cyril Hadlow's arrival brought about a redistribution in the grouping of the party. The two young men were introduced to one another, and Bob Luscombe, after surveying the newcomer very much as he had been wont of yore to take stock of a new boy at school, remarked:

"Saw you out with the hounds the other day."

The eloquent pause with which he followed up this statement seemed to say as plainly as any words could have done: "And a pretty spectacle you were!" Perhaps, however, he did not mean to be offensive—indeed, it is a question whether he ever meant to be so, although he generally was—for he went on: "Think I knew a

brother of yours at Cambridge. First-rate chap; great pal of mine. Just not quite good enough to get his blue for anything, but a nailing good all-round man, nevertheless. He told me about you."

"Then I am sure," observed Cyril, laughing, "he must have told you what an all-round duffer I am. Hubert sorrowfully gave me up as hopeless long ago."

"Oh, I don't know," returned the other, with a fine air of toleration; "he didn't say much about that. You're an artist by trade, ain't you?"

"Well, I was," answered Cyril. "I have been appointed to another trade now, and, as Miss Penrose knows, I haven't shown myself a very promising pupil so far."

The young man with the red hair looked puzzled. "What's that?" he asked. "Pupil of yours, Miss

that's a ripping tie you've got on! Wish you'd give it to me. I'll let you have an awfully jolly one in exchange."

His courtship was of that direct, undisguised nature. All the world was welcome to know that he admired Miss Ord immensely and that his intentions respecting her were serious. Very likely he thought that from the moment she recognised his intentions as such little further would remain to be achieved, for nobody was more fully aware of his pecuniary value than he was. He sat beside her at luncheon, and prosecuted the attack with drum and trumpet, not a little to the amusement of Cyril, who wondered whether he was too stupid to understand, or only self-complacent enough to disregard, the occasional vicious snubs which he earned for himself.

Cyril, placed between Mabel and Mrs. Luscombe, had ample leisure to play the part of a looker-on, which was never uncongenial to him; for the former was evidently doing the same, while the latter was engrossed in a subdued colloquy with Mr. Penrose. It seemed to be in accordance with custom that this discussion should have its sequel in Mr. Penrose's study, for thither the old people adjourned, as a matter of course, after luncheon, whereupon Bob immediately challenged Miss Ord to a game of billiards.

"We might all play," Mabel suggested, but the proposal was received with such marked coldness that she forbore to press it.

"Perhaps," she said, turning to Cyril, while the other couple made for the billiard-room, "you would

like to come round to the stables with me. There is nothing very magnificent for you to see there; but——”

“But, as I should be none the wiser if there were,” remarked Cyril, smiling, “that’s unimportant, and the horses, at all events, won’t think me intrusive, I daresay.”

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. “Oh, it isn’t the fear of spoiling sport that would keep me from intruding,” she candidly avowed; “only sometimes it is better to leave ill alone, don’t you think so?”

He felt it to be something of a compliment that she should thus take his comprehension of the whole situation for granted. The main outlines of it could not, of course, have escaped anybody; but he had not been quite certain that it was so com-

turn her back upon twenty thousand a year, even when coupled with a Tony Lumpkin ?

"Tony Lumpkin can't be depended upon to supply the sort of amusements that she will want," Cyril shrewdly observed.

"Exactly; but she may make that discovery too late. However, as I say, he is so objectionable that I trust a little to his making himself impossible. Unfortunately, my father, who doesn't dislike him at all—poor father couldn't dislike such a fine horseman if he tried—would think it an excellent match for her."

"Couldn't you manage to lay your hand upon a rival?" asked Cyril.

"I am afraid not," Miss Penrose answered; "rich bachelors don't grow in any profusion hereabouts. I suppose *you* don't see your way to come forward?"

"I would a little rather not, thanks. It seems to me that for a good many months to come I shall have quite enough problems on my hands without adding a love affair to them. Moreover, I am so obsolete that I couldn't possibly marry a woman with whom I was not in love, and I can't fall in love with Miss Ord or anybody else because I am told."

Miss Penrose laughed somewhat more heartily than so simple and creditable a statement seemed to warrant. Did she, perhaps, accept it as an intimation that he was unable to fall in with Mrs. Spencer Hadlow's project? If so, she did not take umbrage.

"Ah, I knew you would prove a broken reed," she remarked. "Well, I am glad you don't attempt to stand up for Bob Luscombe, anyhow. He isn't un-

popular; many people get on with him well enough. But he is really odious, and I could see that you thought him so."

Somehow it did not strike Cyril as strange that he should be admitted into Miss Penrose's confidence in this rapid fashion. There are sympathies as well as loves which declare themselves at first sight, and these, naturally, have freer play when the question of love is so palpably excluded from them. The two friends—for a friend each already felt the other to be—had a long talk before they parted about many subjects besides that of Miss Ord's future, which was soon dropped, and if one of them did not know much about art nor the other much about country life, both were eager for extended information. There sprang up between them a tacit alliance which Mabel almost converted into an avowed one by



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attractions he might possess as he did against those of Miss Violet Ord. But that, of course, was quite as it should be. The very last thing he wished for was that relations so pleasantly initiated should be marred by a suspicion of sentimentality.

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CHAPTER VI

THE MATCHMAKERS

THE sitting-room assigned to Cyril at Kingsmoreton Court was not only luxuriously furnished—which made no special appeal to him—but was lighted by a jutting bay-window, where (in obedience to Sir Martin's thoughtful orders) had been placed a broad, solid table, admirably adapted to suit an etcher's requirements. Upon this the young man had heaped the paraphernalia belonging to his art, and at it he seated himself on his return from Mennington, having still

contemporary taste or the absence of it, has longed for freedom to please himself, only to find, when emancipated, that this is precisely what freedom cannot enable him to do. If genius really meant the capacity for taking infinite pains, Cyril Hadlow, as deft, conscientious and scrupulous a craftsman as ever lived, might have turned his new leisure to glorious account; but it is not so. Originality and creative power are gifts which can never be acquired by technical skill, and as for original workers in black and white, they have always been in a very small minority. It was above all as a copyist that Cyril excelled, and imitation, while it may satisfy the heart and mind, by reason of the mechanical dexterity involved, so long as in that way and in no other apparent way are meat and drink procurable, is apt to seem a sorry affair from the moment that it ceases to be obligatory. Better, perhaps, drop the whole thing, try to be a squire, a magistrate, a breeder of cattle, and acquiesce in the humbling fact that art is for one's superiors.

Cyril, with his prepared plate in front of him and the tracing of a sketch, representing Kingsmoreton Court from the south, ready to be transferred to it, had almost arrived at the above reluctant conclusion when a sharp tap at the door was followed, before he had time to respond to it, by the entrance of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow, who wore a neat grey travelling costume, and whose head was enveloped in a white gauze veil.

"Don't you call this friendship?" she asked. "Just delivered at the door by motor, after a twenty-mile

burst, and I fly to hold out both hands to you, without even stopping to wash the dirt off!"

She extended two small hands, which were not dusty, and he could do no less than clasp them, saying:

"Well, I needn't tell you how glad I am to see you back. Have you been having a good time?"

"Middling," she answered, sitting down and removing her hat. "Yes, upon the whole, not too bad; though I dropped my money, as usual."

"That's unfortunate. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, playing bridge. If you come to think of it, that's all one ever does worth mentioning when one stays with people in these times. And you?"

"I have been doing nothing even so worthy of mention as playing bridge. When you came in I was just saying to myself that I should never do

"This," answered Cyril, "is a picture of a house. The house is a beautiful one; so that the picture, helped out by tracery of trees against the sky and a flight of rooks above them, can't well avoid being beautiful also, after a fashion. But in the case of such productions the question of inspiration doesn't arise."

She nodded. "And you pine for more ambitious productions, I suppose. May I smoke?"

She drew from her pocket a gold case, embellished by a monogram in brilliants, took out a cigarette and proceeded to light it deliberately. "You are an artist," she went on; "you aren't as yet anything else and you don't a bit want to be anything else; still you are so philosophical or unselfish or whatever it may be that you would accept a rather tiresome transformation if you didn't feel that affluence was going to be fatal to you from an artistic point of view. There doesn't seem to be any convincing reason why it should; only you know it will, and you are down on your luck, in consequence."

"That's just it," Cyril confessed, surprised—not for the first time—by the ease and accuracy with which this languid little lady could read his thoughts. "At least, that's why I am down on my luck as you say. But there is a reason—quite a good one—for affluence being fatal to art in the ingrained laziness of human nature, which won't allow us to make painful efforts unless they are indispensable. Not that I am, or ever should have been, an artist."

"Oh, rubbish!"

"Etchers are not artists," the young man gloomily

affirmed. "Anyhow, they are not creative artists. I suppose they might be; but they never are. For want of a pallet, perhaps."

"Then why not buy a pallet and a supply of paint? The cost wouldn't be prohibitive, would it?"

In a few rapid sentences he related the story of his great disappointment. The subject was one to which he seldom alluded, but the suggested sympathy of his present companion gave him encouragement, despite the amused smile with which she surveyed him through a drifting veil of cigarette smoke, and despite the prejudice that he entertained against feminine use of tobacco. She was friendly, he thought, and she understood.

She understood so well that her rejoinder, when she made it, was both sensible and apposite.

"It was awfully rough upon you to discover that

my age if you like. I struck thirty-five two months ago. Do I look more?"

She did not look nearly as much, he was honestly able to assure her, and she made him laugh by the further admission that her frankness was chiefly due to a conviction that somebody would soon inform him, if indeed somebody had not already informed him, that she was forty.

"You see," she explained, "I am not quite as universally beloved in these parts as I deserve to be, and when people want to say something nasty about a woman they naturally traduce her on the score of age. I don't mean Constantia, who, cordially as she detests me, always speaks the truth; but there are plenty of others who aren't troubled with her scruples."

Then, paying back confidence with confidence, she confirmed some of the surmises that he had formed respecting her from the outset. Her childlessness, it seemed, had been her main offence—an offence which Sir Martin had outwardly, though never inwardly, pardoned, while Lady Constantia had done neither the one nor the other.

"But apart from that," she owned, "I have erred and strayed in ways which they couldn't be expected to overlook. They were not devoted to my husband; he was hardly the sort of person to inspire devotion. Still he wasn't difficult to get on with, and they naturally thought that I might have got on with him."

She paused for a moment, as if to invite a question; but silence seemed so much more appropriate that

Cyril said nothing, and she resumed, in her leisurely way:

“No; Spencer and I didn’t hit it off. The one thing in the world that he really cared about was politics, which don’t appeal to me the least little bit, and he only cared for them in a Parliamentary sense—as leading up to the Treasury bench, I mean. By the way, I trust you are not a politician.”

“I hold some rather strong political views,” Cyril confessed. “Radical, not to say Socialistic ones, to tell the truth.”

“Ah, that’s different; that might be amusing, or even interesting. Provided that one’s views aren’t practical, one doesn’t run the same risk of being deadly wearisome. Well, Spencer and I never quarrelled; but—in short we went our respective ways. Then he caught a bad cold, poor man, and before one realised that it threatened to be serious, all was over. Cir-

of me—don't you think so?—to like you. Because you *are* a little bit of an interloper, you know."

"Very much of one, and I'm as grateful to you as I ought to be for liking me. At the same time, I can't exactly be said to have cut you out, can I?"

"No; only you're the outward and visible sign of the fact that I am cut out. That's what makes it so creditable to me to have taken a fancy to you."

Some sudden notion appeared to tickle her; for she broke into a gurgle of low laughter which lasted so long that he had to inquire what the joke was.

"I was only thinking," she replied, "that if I had been ten years younger, and if some other little matters of detail could be arranged, you might repair the injustice of fortune by marrying me. But I daresay you won't suspect me of wanting you to do that."

"I am sure you don't," Cyril declared.

"Why so positive? You are a distinct prize, remember, and I am shockingly hard up, and thirty-five is no age, and, if you'll believe me, I am still considered quite attractive. However, my intentions are strictly honourable. Oh, that reminds me of Mabel Penrose. Have you seen her?—and fallen in love with her?"

"I saw her only an hour or two ago at Mannington, where I was invited to lunch," Cyril answered. "No; I haven't fallen in love with her."

"That's a pity. What did you think of her?"

Cyril considered for a moment. "Well," he replied, "I think Miss Penrose is a perfect specimen of the traditional English young lady."

“Faint praise; but perhaps her style of beauty is rather too rustic for your taste. I grant you that she’s rustic. Likewise a trifle ordinary and rather more than a trifle pig-headed. But that you wouldn’t discover at first.”

“Good heavens, no! I can’t imagine making such discoveries as that about Miss Penrose, first or last.”

Adela flung the end of her cigarette out of the open window and laughed again. “You are falling in love with her,” said she, and patted the young man on the shoulder. “I thought you would, and I congratulate you. You can’t do better.”

Cyril refrained from repudiating a charge which would not have been at all disagreeable, had it been true. He even wished it true, seeing that matrimony was his clearly unavoidable destiny, and he was not without a sense of gratitude to Mrs. Spencer Hadlow,

and your husband will get a peerage if he wants one. He can't ride—so our friend the booby tells me—but that doesn't matter, as he seems to be anxious to learn. You will have to instruct him in horsemanship while the booby is giving me lessons, which he says he means to do, and——”

“Yes, but you won't put me off by talking that sort of rubbish, or any other sort of rubbish,” interrupted Miss Penrose composedly; “so you needn't try. Vi, why do you allow the booby, as you call him, to treat you as if you were his property already?”

The two girls were walking, with linked arms, across the park towards Mannington, having just parted from young Luscombe, who had been accompanied as far as the entrance-gates by one of them and resolutely intercepted there by the other.

“There is no known way of preventing men of that kind from behaving as they choose, except directly insulting them,” Violet answered.

“Why not give that way a trial, then? Not that refusing to walk home with him when you were told would have been a direct insult.”

Violet jerked up her shoulders. “Do you suppose I wasn't overjoyed to see you barring the way and waving your umbrella like a flaming sword? Was it my fault that his mamma drove off in the carriage long before he had done showing me how to screw back into the middle pocket and taking that opportunity to squeeze my hands in his huge red paws?”

“Yes,” answered her cousin, “I should think it was.”

“Then all I can say is you don't know much about

stubborn Robert. It had to be an insult or nothing; and if you drive me into a corner, as I see you are bent upon doing, I don't know that I can quite afford to insult twenty thousand a year."

Upon occasion, Violet Ord could be quite as stubborn as Bob Luscombe or anybody else, and at that moment her pretty, childish face had a look upon it which made her sagacious cousin pause. The latter walked on for nearly a hundred yards before remarking:

"I would rather die than marry such a man myself, however rich he might be."

The other pulled her arm away and frowned. "Well then, I wouldn't!" she retorted. "I should hate to die."

"And wouldn't you hate to be Mrs. Bob Luscombe?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I should hate *him*, of

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The girl's eyes were full of tears, and her companion's, which had assumed a somewhat austere and accusing expression, softened at once. "Oh yes; I know," she murmured.

"Don't talk as if you didn't, then. I can't go on for ever being a burden upon other people; there are times when Pont Street is made a hell upon earth to me, and as for Mannington—well, I'm not proud, and I'm not ungrateful, but——"

"Mannington is rather slow, perhaps?"

Violet laughed through her tears. "I didn't say so; but I won't contradict you. Let us call Mannington slow. As a matter of fact, it is. Call me fast if you like—though I'm not. What I may turn into if I don't make haste to establish myself is another question."

"But Bob Luscombe is not the only rich man in England, if it comes to that," Mabel objected. "There is this young Hadlow, for instance, who will be very well off some day."

"Thanks awfully, but I don't covet my neighbour's ass, nor anything that is hers. Except, of course, her good heart and her clear conscience."

"He really isn't an ass, Vi."

"Perhaps not; but he is yours, or going to be. If he took his eyes off you once, it wasn't to respond to my inviting glances, I can tell you."

And during the remainder of the walk Miss Ord declined to be drawn away from a subject which had the double merit of amusing her and affording her shelter.

"Oh yes," she exclaimed impatiently at length, in

reply to a plain question; "I daresay I shall end by accepting him. I don't mean to begin by doing it, if that's any comfort to you; but I don't mean to lose him. There! now you know as much as I do, and I couldn't lay my soul more bare if I were in the confessional. Let us have tea and talk about something less repulsive."

CHAPTER VII

NO INTENTIONS

"THE more I see of Cyril the better I like him," said Sir Martin. "I make no extravagant claims on his behalf; but at least it must be admitted, I think, that he is doing his very best to fit himself for a life which can't be altogether congenial to him."

Mr. Pickering nodded assent. "Yes, he is doing his best; he is a good fellow."

"And considering how easily he might have been a bad fellow," Sir Martin pursued, "considering what a large proportion of young fellows are bad in one way or another, one can't but be grateful to him for not being the dozen or so of things that he isn't."

Mr. Pickering laughed. "Well, he has no conspicuous vices; still you had better not expect him to be entirely negative. There are subjects, religious and political, upon which he strikes me as a trifle too positive. He'll outgrow all that in time, though."

"So far as I can gather," remarked Lady Constantia in her usual detached and uninterested way, "he is a Socialist and an Atheist."

The three were seated round the card-table at which they had been playing a rubber of whist

after dinner, Adela, who had been the Rector's partner, having retired "to write letters." In other words, she had gone upstairs to smoke, as they all knew, though they never accorded that practice the tacit sanction of a verbal allusion. The Rector was not so ill-advised as to undertake his young friend's defence. To doubt the literal accuracy of Old Testament narratives is a very different thing from being an Atheist, while Socialism has become a somewhat elastic term; but Lady Constantia probably meant nothing more than that she did not agree with her husband in liking Cyril and that the curate had been telling her tales. It seemed best, therefore, to ignore the interpolation and merely repeat, "He'll outgrow all that."

"I am glad," Sir Martin meditatively resumed, "that they have taken him up at Mannington. He

replied Sir Martin, smiling; "but of course, I know nothing about it. I hope she may, that's all."

"Oh, so do I!" Lady Constantia exclaimed, with unwonted fervour. And presently she added, "If he marries, he must necessarily be given a separate establishment."

"Well, yes," her husband assented; "his marriage will have that drawback, no doubt."

"But you can afford it."

"Oh, I can afford whatever may be needed for house rent and so forth. What I was thinking of was the loss of his company."

Lady Constantia rose, and walked quickly round the table. "Martin," said she, in a pained voice, "you can't have become so fond as that of a total stranger in this short time!"

"I really believe I should miss him," Sir Martin owned, scanning her troubled face; "I plead guilty to having become rather fond of him. I wish you had!"

"Be sure," she returned, with great emphasis and earnestness, "that I shall never do that! How can I take fancies to strangers? I am too old; we are both too old, and—and not so happy as we once were. Why should we wish for anything more than to be allowed to end our days in peace? Surely that is not much to ask!"

Rarely indeed was she moved to exhibit such emotion before a third person, but perhaps Mr. Pickering's presence did not embarrass her, for if anybody was acquainted with the secrets of her heart, he was. Sir Martin, oddly enough, was not,

and to the Rector there was something infinitely pathetic in the spectacle of the two wistful old faces, exchanging glances which were fated to miss their mark. He fulfilled the only useful function of third persons by hastening to relieve tension.

“We are getting ahead of events,” he briskly reminded his hearers; “we haven’t caught our hare yet. As for peace, I fear it isn’t to be had at any price on this side of the grave. I have been seeking peace and ensuing it ever since I took charge of this benefice, but what with curates and dissenters and poachers and drunkards, not to mention total abstainers, it always contrives to elude me. Now what I should like to be told is this: when I know for a fact that a certain parishioner of mine is in the habit of snaring game belonging to a person who shall be nameless, am I bound to give information or am I not?”

themselves just then. So, at all events, an observer of the young people, seated side by side on a sofa at the far end of the Mannington drawing-room and conversing with apparent absorption, might have been justified in thinking, and so Mr. Penrose, nodding drowsily behind the *Field*, which he had picked up, did think. Mr. Penrose was resignedly acquiescent. Being a sensible old gentleman, he was aware that certain developments are as inevitable in every human existence as is the slow process of growth, maturity and decay in every human body. Fathers possess, no doubt, a right of veto; but this can only be exercised in extreme cases, and there was nothing against young Hadlow; on the contrary, there were many things to be urged in his favour. As for his more shadowy avuncular right of veto, Mr. Penrose had so little inclination to brandish that feeble weapon that he had only chuckled when his niece and Bob Luscombe had betaken themselves to the billiard-room a quarter of an hour before. Luscombe was all right. No harm in Luscombe, except a taste for low company, of which marriage would very soon cure him. Devilish ugly chap, if you like; but that was Violet's affair. Moreover, it is all humbug to say that an income of twenty thousand ought to make no difference to a girl who has neither home nor fortune of her own. Of course it makes a difference. Mr. Penrose had not scrupled to enunciate the above opinion to sundry neighbours and cronies of his who had been partaking of his hospitality; for there had been a dinner-party at Mannington that evening, and although everybody else had departed at the orthodox hour of half-past ten, these two young

men still lingered—having, it must be supposed, received some intimation that they were at liberty to do so.

“Oh, she asked him to play,” Mabel was saying to her neighbour; “that’s Violet all over. After taking no notice of him the whole evening and reducing him to the most satisfactory state of sulks and humility, she must needs undo all her work at the last moment!”

“Perhaps she thought she had gone a little too far,” Cyril suggested.

“Not a doubt of it, and naturally he understood why she wanted to make amends. I despair of her when she does such things!”

“She seems to do them with her eyes open, anyhow.”

“It’s just because her eyes are so wide open that I despair of her. I hoped he would disgust her, and he

his involuntary conquests; perhaps he thought (as a fact, he did) that there was nothing out of the ordinary in them; perhaps he was honestly unaware of his striking physical advantages. But his neighbour, who could not and did not ignore the fact that he was quite the handsomest man she had ever beheld, pictured him to herself as beset, during his Continental wanderings, by charmers of the Latin races, and although she was far from entertaining any wish to compete with them, the vision, for some reason or other, was not wholly pleasing to her. Also his generalisations appeared to her to be over-hasty, and for the honour of her sex, she said:

“Ah, but you are not speaking of nice women.”

“Am I not?” he returned. “Well, no; I suppose not. But the nice ones, after all, are a select minority.”

“Like the nice men.”

“Oh yes, like the nice men. All I meant to say was that in the matter of love, or what goes by that name, our standpoint is not the same as yours. The mere circumstance that a man is enamoured of you gives you a sort of bias in his favour, whether you like him or dislike him. With us it is just the other way about; our sensations in a similar case are a mixture of wrath and alarm.”

Well, that was another generalisation which might not be entirely warranted; but as an index to the speaker's own mental attitude it possessed some interest and piquancy. Mabel, however, did him the justice to acquit him of having purposely sounded a warning note, and was only curious to ascertain

whether he agreed with her very strongly held opinion that it is a thousand times better to remain single than to marry without love. It appeared that he did, as regarded himself, but that he was not quite so certain about other people.

“Marriages of convenience, which are the rule in France, don't result half as badly as French novelists make out. Husbands and wives expect less of one another there than they do in this country, and, generally speaking, I think they get more.”

“I can understand that the husbands may get as much as they have bargained for; but what about the wives?”

“They seem to be contented. They haven't any illusions to lose; and I suppose, on an average view of human nature, they are just as likely to find that they have drawn prizes as blanks. You see, Miss Penrose, the unpleasant truth is that love, like

“Even Dante and Petrarch?”

“You can hardly class them among the erotics. Besides, both Beatrice and Laura were abstractions. What, after all, does falling in love mean? Shouldn't we have to confess, if we were honest, that illusion is the very essence of it? We begin by being physically attracted to a given person; we proceed to endow her with a hundred imaginary attributes; then we either marry her, or get to know her so well that we find she doesn't possess them, and then—well, then comes the end.”

“As if one couldn't forgive, or as if one demanded perfection! You aren't talking about love at all, you are talking about fancy. The real thing outlasts what you call physical attraction, and old age, and quarrels, and everything else which, according to you, ought to knock it on the head. You needn't look any farther than Kingsmoreton for an example.”

“Do you ask me to believe that Sir Martin and Lady Constantia are in love with one another?”

“Why not? One can't tell how people feel at that age, but I should think there might be a sort of loyalty to the past which would amount to it. Anyhow, they care more for one another than they do for anybody else alive.”

“Mutual affection and esteem are precisely the results that may be looked for from a marriage of convenience.”

The discussion—a somewhat artificial one, inasmuch as neither of the disputants was so eager for a dialectic victory as for increased light upon the other's general

character—was kept up until the billiard players, looking rather flushed and cross, returned to interrupt it. In their case, evidently, the course of love had not been running smooth, and Mr. Luscombe's exit was both ungracious and ungraceful.

"Well, I'm off," he curtly announced. "Good-night, everybody."

He shook hands with his host and hostess, nodded to Cyril and stalked away, without so much as glancing at Miss Old, who made a face at his retreating back.

"Charming, high-bred creature, isn't he?" said she, after he had banged the door behind him.

"He is always like that when he is at his worst," Mabel remarked, with some complacency.

"Indeed he isn't!" returned her cousin. "If you want to see him at his worst you must be alone with him, and he must just have swallowed one

to tears that Cyril hastened to take his leave. While he was driving homewards under a starry sky, he devoted a few minutes to being sorry for the poor girl, and then dismissed her from his mind, as he found it pleasanter to dwell upon thoughts of one who was immeasurably her superior. Yes, he told himself, Mabel Penrose was well-born British maidenhood raised to its highest expression. Fresh, spontaneous, clean in heart and speech, liking the things that girls in her station do well to like, free from any taint of the terrible, sinister vulgarity which has of late years invaded every class of English society. Pretty, too, with a beauty which grew steadily upon you, though it did not startle you. It would be easy to fall in love with her. Or rather it would be easy and pleasant to make love to her, given a disposition on both sides towards acquiescence in benevolent schemes and in the promise of a smiling, placid future. Since, however, that proviso was palpably wanting, there was no more to be said about it, save that friendship remained.

Something to the above effect was the gist of his reply to Mrs. Spencer, who met him at the top of the staircase on his return to Kingsmoreton, accompanied him to his sitting-room and demanded categorical information.

"Well, that's all right; that's as right as possible," was her verdict, after he had concluded his narrative, which she had punctuated with a succession of little nods. "Didn't I tell you all along that you would fall a victim to Mabel?"

“But I thought I had just told you that that is exactly what I haven't done.”

Adela laughed. “Oh, that's what you thought you were telling me; but what would be the use of having eyes and ears if one had to accept everything that reached them literally? Would you like to know what is going to happen? You will take your time, both of you; you won't be in any hot haste; but the crisis ought to be reached by June or July next, and the wedding, I should think, might be fixed for November or thereabouts. At that rate, I might order a pink frock for it—pink being my colour. I daresay you haven't noticed that I am still in half mourning.”

She waved away his disclaimers and yawned. “Now I'm going to bed,” said she. “Oh, what an evening we did have!—the Rector and solemn whist, and the usual black looks for you know whom. Well, it's the

let me see a little more of you before you surrender your liberty."

"How can I if my betrothal is to take place early in the summer?"

"By coming up to London, of course. It's in the compact that you are to be allowed an occasional holiday, isn't it?"

"Yes, I am to please myself about that; and indeed I ought to pay my mother and sisters a visit every now and then. My mother, by the way, is full of curiosity about you. She says my letters give her the impression that you are by far the most original and interesting person in this house."

"Does she? *Quel flair!*"

But it seemed that Mrs. Spencer felt no corresponding curiosity about Cyril's mother; for she did not offer to call upon that lady, as she might have done. She scribbled an address in Sloane Gardens upon a scrap of paper and tossed it to him, saying:

"There!—that's my humble dwelling; mind you look me up. Meanwhile, I have a parting word of counsel to you. Mabel is a girl in a thousand, and she has almost all the virtues and charms that there are; only she isn't what you could call exceptionally quick at seeing a joke. It's necessary to be serious with her: otherwise she'll begin to distrust you, which will be apt to bring the whole Spanish castle down with a run. Good-night."

That criticism, Cyril thought, was not unlikely to be just. He had himself noticed that Miss Penrose resembled the majority of good women in disliking

irony, and of course it may prove a trifle irksome to spend your life with a person so constituted. However, as he did not contemplate spending his life with Mabel, the caution had no special significance for him.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. RIGBY'S DISCIPLE

"You *have* quarrelled with him, then? What a blessing!"

Such was Mabel Penrose's comment upon her cousin's proclaimed intention of leaving for London forthwith, which was made known to her in her bedroom shortly after Bob Luscombe had taken himself off in deep dudgeon.

Violet heaved a sigh. "It is some consolation," she remarked, "to think that if my arrival is always a bore to Ida, my departure is a blessing to you."

"You know so well how untrue that is," returned the other, "that I am not going to give myself the trouble of contradicting you. Did he behave very outrageously?"

"Oh," answered Violet, with a grimace, "one has been chased round billiard-tables before now. He behaved as men of his sort always do when they have had a little too much to drink. He is repenting already, and to-morrow afternoon he will certainly come over to lick the ground and implore forgiveness. That's why he won't find me here."

"Because you don't mean to forgive him, I hope."

"No; only because I don't want to be obliged to do

it so soon. It's just possible—of course it isn't likely, still it's possible—that I may never be obliged to forgive him at all. There's the whole London season ahead, and with luck I may pick up one of the rich crumbs that Ida brushes off her table when she sees her way to devouring a richer one."

"With luck," said Mabel, "you may meet some man whom you will really care for, and then it won't matter whether he is rich or poor."

But Violet, who was out of temper, did not take this suggestion in good part.

"That's such rot!" she returned. "Of course the one and only thing I insist upon is that my future husband shall be at least moderately rich. If he has an amiable disposition and isn't downright repulsive to look at, so much the better; but details are details. What's the use of being a hypocrite?"

"I am not a hypocrite," Mabel protested.

and it was always vain to reason with her. She had a conscience of a sort and pride of a sort and refined instincts, with regard to which it could only be hoped that they would assert themselves at the right moment; but to drive her demanded a firm, light hand, together with qualifications which were denied by circumstances to her cousin.

Mabel quite realised that her own exceptionally fortunate lot gave her an air of insincerity when she attempted to preach sound doctrine; so she held her peace, although it was not the case that she shrank from facing such ugly facts as that Ida Tilehurst had not a shred of character left or that the dowerless Violet could hardly grant herself the luxury of being squeamish.

Nor was there any truth in the assertion that she had lost, or was going to lose, her heart to young Hadlow. Imagine losing one's heart to a man who regarded love as a transient insanity and marriage as depending for its success upon a basis of mutual toleration! But just as Cyril had said to himself that it would be easy to fall a little in love with her, so she found that, although he might not be lovable, it was impossible to help liking him. She saw him frequently, almost daily, after her cousin had left her and after he had been deprived of Adela's always diverting companionship; once or twice Sir Martin brought him out hunting again; more than once or twice he availed himself of some pretext to ride or walk over to tea. Rapidly, insensibly their intimacy developed; each gladly recognised that there was no misprision of that intimacy on the other's part, and it

hardly needs to be added that they would have been playing a rather dangerous game if any danger could be said to attach to a state of things so inherently desirable.

"Don't you think it is rather odd that we should hit it off so well," Cyril asked, one day, at the close of a protracted conversation, "seeing that we differ upon almost every subject under the sun?"

"We agree upon one point," she answered; "we always want to get at the truth if we can, and we aren't above taking a lesson about things of which we happen to be ignorant."

He nodded and laughed. "Oh yes; we teach one another things. That is, you teach me things. Thanks to you, I now know much more than I did about the art of venery; I have even arrived at a glimmering of sympathy with your dignified, picturesque Tory traditions, though I can't feel that there

when a man, be he never so broad-minded, must needs avow himself a partisan, and to Cyril this time came when the Easter recess brought Colonel Bampfylde, the Conservative member for the Kingsmoreton division, down on a visit to Mannington for the purpose of addressing his constituents. The Colonel, a middle-aged, much respected landowner from the other side of the county, represented Unionism, and in that capacity enjoyed the support of Sir Martin Hadlow, whose late son he had succeeded; but the Unionist party was at that time beginning to be rent by internal dissensions; a general election was thought to be imminent, and the issues before the country were so involved that there was no longer any depending upon votes which had until recently been considered safe.

"Between you and me," Colonel Bampfylde confided to Miss Penrose on the evening of his arrival, "I hardly know what to talk about to these fellows. I know what I'd rather not talk about, because everything that our side has done of late is so open to misconstruction, and generally speaking, one can find safety by confining oneself to matters of local interest. But this time, as bad luck will have it, they have got a grievance about that land of Hadlow's which he won't sell, and I can't oppose Hadlow. They want to develop the place, you know, make it a seaside resort, build a pier and a pavilion and so forth."

"And ruin it."

"Well, I suppose their ideas of ruin may not be the same as ours. Anyhow, Hadlow stands on his rights and says he'll see them farther first."

“And aren't you with him?”

“On æsthetic grounds I am; I should be sorry to see Kingsmoreton transformed into a west-country Margate. But the butcher and the baker and the grocer would not be sorry at all. Like the rest of us, they are anxious to increase their incomes, and in these days it is dangerous for landlords to be obstructive.”

“Can Parliament prevent them from being obstructive?”

“Not in cases of this kind; but Mr. Rigby is of opinion that Parliament ought to have that power, and electors can refuse to vote for a candidate who thinks otherwise.”

“Mr. Rigby ought to be ashamed of coming and stirring up strife in a constituency with which he has nothing to do.”

of a stolid audience, nor could anybody be more honestly convinced than he was that landlords are a selfish and tyrannical class. For the rest, a very decent man, with a gift of fluent oratory, shaggy, iron-grey hair, an unkempt beard and a twinkle in his eye. Kingsmoreton, already more or less vaguely dissatisfied with its lot for several reasons, some of which were not bad ones, was certain to be fascinated by his plausible fallacies. So, at least, Colonel Bampfylde predicted, and on the following morning Miss Penrose obtained unwelcome proof that one person who, though not an elector, must be accounted influential, had become an ardent disciple of Mr. Rigby's as the result of having heard that gentleman speak.

This was Cyril, whom she found busily engaged on an admirable pen-and-ink sketch of Jacob Beer's head, and whose animated conversation with his sitter was not interrupted by her approach, which indeed neither of them observed. They had established themselves in the sunshine outside Jacob's cottage, whither Mabel, after having driven Colonel Bampfylde into the town, had strolled up for a quarter of an hour's chat with an old friend.

"Now I bain't contradictin' of 'ee, mind," her old friend was saying; "I d'know but what Rigbee med be right if yu and me and 'im was makin' a fresh start in outlandish parts. But this 'ere country's old England, d' yu see, sir, and avore yu turns England upside down yu 'm got t' convart a powerful lot o' volk, I rackon."

"Just what we are trying to do, Jacob," the artist

returned. "Don't look at me, please; look towards your left shoulder—that's right! We are doing our best to convert you, and we shall undoubtedly succeed sooner or later, because it is your battle that we are fighting. You have only a foggy idea that some abstraction which you call by the name of God made the world as it is, and that you will get into trouble if you improve it."

"This 'ere world," retorted Jacob doggedly, "wur created in zeven days by th' Almighty fur th' use o' man, and cursed thru' th' disobadience o' th' zame, 'cordin to Scriptur'. That I 'olds tu, 'straction or no 'straction."

"Very well; it was created for the use of mankind, not for the profit or pleasure of a handful of men. What was meant for all has been seized and is held by a very small minority. A great French writer expressed the truth in as few words as possible when he

"You don't see the point," Cyril began.

"Nor anybody else either," struck in Mabel from the background. "Mr. Hadlow knows just as well as you do, Jacob, that he is talking nonsense. He is only trying to excite you, so that he may throw a little more fire into his portrait, which is splendid, with the fire or without it."

She bent over the artist's shoulder, upon which she laid her hand to prevent him from rising, while Jacob protested, "Lor' love 'ee, ma dear, there bain't no vire tu be struck out o' me by such vulishness!"

But Cyril would not admit that he had been talking nonsense at all. He was himself much more excited than his model; he began at once to say what a splendid fellow Rigby was, with what satisfaction he had listened to a man who knew his own mind and was not afraid to speak it, concluding with a strong expression of opinion that in the particular question at issue Sir Martin had not a leg to stand upon. "There never was a clearer case of legality being at variance with justice and equity," he declared.

Mabel did not take him over seriously. "So you would like to disfigure poor Kingsmoreton for ever—you who call yourself an artist!" she exclaimed.

"What I should like has nothing to do with the matter," he returned. "If the wishes of the inhabitants could be dismissed from consideration, I should like to pull down every building that has been erected here within the last thirty years. But you can't disregard the wishes of the inhabitants; neither they nor their dwellings exist for the sole purpose of being picturesque."

“Perhaps,” observed Mabel more gravely, “we don’t any of us know for certain what the purpose of our existence is. Most of us believe, though, that we are what we are and where we are by the will of the Higher Power which you called just now—but I don’t think you quite meant what you said—an abstraction.”

Now, this was approaching somewhat perilous ground with a young lady who had never had the shadow of a religious doubt in her life, and Cyril, well aware that it behoved him to walk circumspectly, was minded to hold his peace, as he had done hitherto on similar occasions. Still he could not resist pointing out that dumb and blind submission to the actual was a poor compliment to a Creator who was supposed to have endowed His creatures with reasoning faculties for their guidance. The result was that the con-

"Meaning Mr. Rigby?" inquired the Rector. "I rather like Mr. Rigby's politics myself; they have the advantage of lying altogether outside the practical sphere, so that nobody need trouble to controvert them unless he likes. Confess now, you Socialistic young artist, that ideals are alluring chiefly because there isn't any danger of their being realised."

But Cyril was not disposed to break a lance with the good-humoured Rector that morning. He had put away his unfinished study, together with his materials, and, muttering something about being late for luncheon, took himself off rather hurriedly.

"We were in the midst of a wrangle," Mabel explained. "I am glad you came when you did, because I don't want to quarrel with him; but every now and then he goes a little too far."

"Just what I feel, Miss Penrose," eagerly agreed Mr. Sandford, a swarthy little, clean-shaven cleric who wore gold-rimmed spectacles. "I have had several talks with him lately upon the subject of the so-called Higher Criticism, and as long as he confines himself to serious discussion I don't complain, for I can cope with him or any other sceptic there——"

"Oh, no doubt," put in the Rector demurely.

"But what I do object to is the levity with which he treats miracles. A man may disbelieve in miracles; that is perhaps more his misfortune than his fault. But he should not assail them with such an easy and clumsy weapon as ridicule in the presence of a priest."

"I don't think he should," said Mabel.

"To say that an ass's mouth is not so formed as to be capable of articulate speech, or that anybody can produce a rainbow at will, is to beg the whole question."

"Well, I daresay he would admit that," Mabel observed.

"If so, the bad taste of such sneers becomes all the more apparent. And he is for ever bringing up Jonah," added Mr. Sandford querulously.

"For ever?" repeated the Rector, with raised eyebrows. "That certainly does appear excessive. Once was enough for the whale."

Mr. Sandford refrained in a marked manner from smiling. He could not help thinking it a great pity that his Rector, whom he sincerely respected, should so often indulge in jocularities which might be interpreted as profanities by those who did not know

The above estimate of his character and views would have struck Cyril as very superficial indeed. He walked away feeling more annoyed, and also more discouraged, than he had done at any moment since his introduction to Kingsmoreton. From the first he had been under no illusion as to his power of adjusting himself to environments which were so little to his taste. Sport he could manage, or thought he could; magisterial functions, when, in the natural course of things, they should devolve upon him, he would be able to discharge without treading upon anybody's toes; while tenants would assuredly find him easy and sympathising to deal with. But he had always recognised that one really formidable lion lay in his path, and it was a matter for regret that Rigby's advent and eloquence should have roused the animal. He did not want to distress Sir Martin and perturb the whole neighbourhood by placarding himself as a Revolutionist; yet if you are an honest man and honestly believe in certain doctrines, circumstances may arise under which silence ceases to be permissible. Cyril, therefore, seeing breakers ahead, could not but be sorry that his conscience and temperament precluded him from shaping a safer course. Nevertheless, it may be that, had he held on to the course of self-scrutiny a little longer, he would have discovered that what ruffled him was not so much the prospect of being compelled to oppose his best friends as the incident of his having gratuitously wounded one of them and gone rather near to losing his own temper in the process. She had professed, indeed, to be, as he was, an unpre-

judiced seeker after truth; but that, perhaps, is what none of her sex ever is, has been or will be, and it is only a fool who asks more of women than they possess. In other words, he was a little disappointed in Mabel and more than a little vexed with himself.

CHAPTER IX

A FIASCO

"Oh dear, no," said Sir Martin, "I don't intend to give in about it. I have had a note from Bampfylde, who is getting a little nervous about his seat, and who would evidently like me to give in; but I can't oblige him. Poor dear Bampfylde is apt to forget that Kingsmoreton has always hitherto returned a Liberal, and that he only represents us on sufferance. I could put in a Liberal Unionist at the next election as easily as possible. That is, always supposing that some Radical carpet-bagger, backed by Rigby, didn't beat my man."

"I am on Rigby's side, you know," Cyril thought it his duty to announce.

"So I understand. Not that Rigby cares a pin about this dispute. Upon principle, he opposes landlords whenever and wherever he is given a chance, but he probably dislikes the jerry-builders and publicans and so forth, whom I decline to enrich, a good deal more than he does me. In any case, he can't even worry me; far less make me change my mind. I went to the extreme limit of concession—I wish now that I had not conceded so much—when I let them run up their wretched hotel and that row of flimsy lodging-houses."

“Well, it is chiefly on account of the general principle involved that I am on Rigby’s side,” said Cyril. “I think as he does; I can’t think otherwise. But at the same time I must admit your right of objection to my saying so.”

“I assure you I claim no such right,” answered Sir Martin good-humouredly; “this is a free country, and you are of an age to judge for yourself. All I claim is the right to act upon my own judgment, such as it is, while I live. After me the deluge, perhaps; though, to tell you the truth, I don’t think there will be a deluge. Are you going to hear Rigby speak to-night?”

“I rather thought of going, if you don’t mind.”

“Not I; go by all means. I wish it were possible for me to go with you; for if the man talks nonsense, he appears, by the printed reports of his speeches, to talk it excellently, and I doubt whether

good taste, would have preferred to remain in the body of the hall; but he had no excuse ready, and why, after all, should he be ashamed of his opinions? By way of compensation, he was introduced to Mr. Rigby, who talked to him in a low voice throughout the chairman's introductory remarks, and whose comments upon the audience were scarcely what might have been expected.

"Tories at heart, every Jack one of them," said he. "If I held a brief for Colonel Bampfylde, I'd have them cheering the roof off in five minutes. You won't find seafaring men in favour of change so long as they have clothes to their backs and food enough to keep body and soul together. What was good enough for their fathers is good enough for them, and agricultural labourers, as a rule, are much of the same mind. So if it wasn't for the big towns, the world would stand still. However, I must do what I can with them."

He could do a good deal, as Cyril had already discovered, for he had an easy delivery and a simple vocabulary; his terse sentences went straight home, and if his witticisms were neither novel nor particularly brilliant, they had the effect that they were designed to have of putting his hearers in a good humour. He began, as in duty bound, by condemning the vexatious action of the lord of the manor, against which the meeting had been called together to protest, and, of course, he had something to say in derision of a social system which enabled lords of manors to block the progress and prosperity of towns wherein they did not even live. Also he wondered,

in a parenthesis, whether a landlord who resided thirty miles off was a likely sort of person to promote the reforms so reasonably demanded by his constituents. But it soon became evident to one of Mr. Rigby's admirers that the speaker was merely using this question of Kingsmoreton's proposed development as a whetstone upon which to grind an axe of his own.

Rigby, in truth, had as little liking for tradesmen in a hurry to grow rich as he had for capitalists or landed proprietors, and his ostensible theme was soon thrust aside to make way for the propaganda which it was his mission to spread. He spoke with the conviction which is always in a measure convincing; he firmly believed that organised labour is destined to rule the world, now that the principle of rule by majorities has been recognised in all civilised

Nor did he force the pathos of his peroration, which dealt with the vast multitudes of women and children who, in opulent England, stand ever on the brink of famine, while to Cyril, accustomed to the more sweeping schemes of Continental agitators, the programme that he put forward—payment of Members of Parliament, Old Age Pensions, a minimum rate of wages, Government aid to the unemployed, and so forth—sounded studiously moderate.

It did not sound that, nor anything approaching that, to Mr. Jury, builder and contractor, who occupied the chair. Poor Mr. Jury, himself an employer of labour, and well acquainted with the difficulty of getting a remunerative job of work through in these evil days, had never bargained for such a diatribe as was being poured forth under his scandalised nose for the encouragement of Kingsmoreton idlers and loafers. Minimum wage indeed!—as if everybody did not know that the rate of wages at a given moment depends upon conditions with which it is sheer madness to attempt interference! Moreover, all this was quite irrelevant to the issue, and he was by no means sure that it was not his duty as chairman to get up and say so. Finding that his courage fell a little short of the requisite height, he wriggled and purpled and coughed deferential dissent at intervals until the orator resumed his seat. Then an idea occurred to him. Why should not young Mr. Hadlow be requested to move a vote of thanks to their distinguished visitor? He really felt too unwell to do it himself after the outrageous sentiments to which Rigby had

given utterance, and possibly the sight of the future squire might remind the assemblage that he was not there to lend sanction to any crack-brained whimsies, but merely in order to censure the conduct of one obstinate and short-sighted person. Accordingly, he touched the young man's elbow and whispered his suggestion, which was complied with in a trice.

Cyril, moved and stirred beyond all the bounds of prudence, rose willingly to proclaim his hearty concurrence in every word that had fallen from Mr. Rigby's lips. He went a good deal farther than Rigby had done in protesting that, for his own part, he longed to see all privileges, all monopolies, all so-called rights in relation to land swept away. The will and welfare of the people must, he declared, prevail in the long run—with more to the like effect.

He did not know much about the trend of

In vain Cyril endeavoured to explain that, widely though his ideas differed from those of his kinsman on questions of public policy, he would be the last to breathe a word in disparagement of that high-minded and honourable gentleman; all he obtained in response was a volley of derisive shouts, and repeated efforts on his part to obtain a hearing met with no success at all. "Us bain't gwine to listen to 'ee!" he was told: after which his persistency brought about an attempt to drag him bodily from the platform, which was only frustrated by the intervention of Mr Rigby.

"What did I tell you?" asked the latter, when the meeting had broken up in some disorder. "You and I, Mr. Hadlow, may maintain that class distinctions are rubbish—one of us thinks so and doesn't often say so; the other says so and maybe doesn't think so—but they're going to last long after we are both in our graves. The worst thing you can possibly do before a popular audience is to decry the class to which you belong. Depend upon it, if they don't call you an impostor, they'll set you down as a traitor."

"I am very sorry," said the crestfallen Cyril. "I have done more harm than good to your cause, I am afraid."

Rigby jerked up his broad, round shoulders and laughed. "Oh, I daresay the cause won't suffer much," he answered drily; "between you and me, I didn't expect to accomplish a great deal for it here."

But if Cyril had worked little injury to the cause which Rigby had at heart, he had certainly served

both Mr. Jury and himself an ill-turn by his impetuosity. Unfortunately, the *Kingsmoreton Gazette*, a weekly journal of wavering political bias, appeared on the following day, with a full account of the proceedings at the Market Hall and a leading article in which young Mr. Hadlow was somewhat severely handled.

“Owing to the uproar provoked by it,” the writer of the article admitted, “parts of Mr. Hadlow’s speech were indistinctly heard, and our report must be taken as subject to corrections, which we trust may be forthcoming; but we fear that there can be no mistake as to its drift, and this will doubtless be received with as much surprise and disapproval by our readers as it was by those present at the time. That some words of regrettable bitterness should be spoken at a public meeting in reference to a question upon which local feeling runs high was perhaps only to be anticipated:

next morning, the footman who acted as his valet having thoughtfully brought a copy of the paper upstairs with the appropriate accompaniment of hot water. Another copy lay at Lady Constantia's elbow on the breakfast-table, whither he betook himself in a mood of genuine contrition; but neither she nor Sir Martin alluded to it, while the latter displayed an eagerness to talk rapidly about anything else which was possibly meant to convey a hint. At all events, Lady Constantia's stony silence and abstracted gaze seemed to Cyril to put immediate apologies out of the question; so he swallowed his food with such show of appetite as he could command, and postponed what he had to say until he obtained release. Then, following Sir Martin into the old gentleman's study, he began :

"First of all, sir, I do hope you will acquit me of having attacked you with 'unmannerly abuse.' I didn't behave so badly as that; though I daresay you will think that I behaved badly enough in speaking at all."

"Don't distress yourself, my dear fellow," returned Sir Martin, smiling; "sit down and take a cigarette. I am not in the least offended, and not for one moment do I believe that you were abusive. Perhaps you won't mind my saying that I do think you were rather indiscreet; but that, of course, is a very different thing. The indiscretion of this silly little newspaper might have been nipped in the bud if your meeting hadn't unluckily taken place on the eve of its appearance. As it is, I must write them a letter—you had better write to them also—explaining

that you were misreported and that you were present on the occasion with my knowledge and consent. When all's said, it is only a hurricane in a horse-pond, and such things have no more importance than one chooses to give them."

"It is very generous of you to take my escapade in that spirit," said Cyril, who was really ashamed of himself, "but the fact remains that I did associate myself with Rigby's creed, and I did lend my support, for what it was worth, to your enemies."

"Quite so. Well, I have called you indiscreet. Jury and the rest of them, by the way, are no enemies of mine, and if they were, I should have to thank you for strengthening my hands against them. We shall hear no more of their precious scheme for some time to come, I suspect. As a matter of fact, they would have lost their money if I had sanctioned it, for such undertakings seldom pay, I believe, unless they are

more angular even than I expected to be. Don't you think the experiment had better be abandoned? You have given it a very fair and patient trial: you must feel what a failure it is. I hardly like to assert that I am grateful to you, because I must seem like the very personification of ingratitude; but this, at any rate, I can honestly say—I shall be downright glad, for some reasons, to be dismissed. What I should long for more than anything else in the world at this moment, if I had only myself to consider, would be the necessity of earning my own living again at the one calling which Nature meant me to follow."

Sir Martin laid his hand on the young man's shoulder. "But you haven't only yourself to consider," he answered; "I put in a claim. Not, to be sure, upon your gratitude. I did not choose you as my heir because I liked you—for I did not even know you by sight at the time—but because you were the natural person to follow me. Now, however, we have become friends, and academic differences of opinion shall not part us if I can help it."

"Oh, if they were only academic!"

"Really I must not be asked to call them anything else. I accept the risk of your going in for eccentric experiments after my death; some risks one must always be prepared to take. With Spencer I grant you that there would have been none; Spencer was exceptional. But I can't disguise from myself that if my poor boy Reggie had lived, the estates would have been exposed to greater dangers than they are likely ever to incur from you. No doubt you have

been told all about him—least said soonest mended. To me,” Sir Martin went on, with a sigh, “nobody ever breathes his name. I suppose my good friends hereabouts think that it would hurt me to speak of him, which is a mistake. He died like a gentleman and a brave man, and that consoles me. It does not, unhappily, console his mother, as you may recollect my telling you on the evening of your arrival here.”

“Yes,” answered Cyril, “I recollect very well what you told me then, and I must say that in nothing has my failure been more complete than in my efforts to propitiate Lady Constantia.”

This was undeniable, and Sir Martin did not deny it. He only sighed again and resumed:

“You are not to blame; nor indeed is she, poor thing. It’s a case for time and patience. Just now, as I am sure you will understand, she is pardonably annoyed about what took place last night, and that

before you depart; it doesn't seem altogether improbable that you may have done yourself some damage there."

It seemed to Cyril absolutely certain that he had; yet he could not admit that he owed excuses or retractations to Miss Penrose.

"I think," said he, "that if I go, I will do it at once, and without attempting to make my peace anywhere."

"As you please. There's always safety in saying nothing, and I don't presume to dictate. All I beg of you is not to leave me in the lurch."

Such an appeal, coming in the place of the summary ejection which Cyril had half anticipated, not to say desired, could hardly be resisted. Nor, truth to tell, was it wholly unwelcome to its recipient. To nobody—to Cyril even less than to most men—is the acknowledgment of a total fiasco palatable, and perhaps it was due to Sir Martin, as well as to himself, that he should try again. Moreover, the prospect of a holiday caused his heart to leap within him.

CHAPTER X

LES CHÈRES ÉTUDES

"UPON my word," exclaimed Cyril, surveying through the open window a row of stunted trees, the young foliage of which still showed fresh and green against a strip of pale blue sky, "there are worse places than Royal Avenue, Chelsea."

"There are a great many better ones," his mother and his two sisters responded with one voice.

"There are," the young man agreed; "but I am not disposed just now to include Kingsmoreton in

replied. "Won't you allow me any credit for natural affection? Honestly, I'm delighted to be with you all again, and perhaps that's why murky Chelsea doesn't strike me as a bit murky this evening. That may also account for the distinct advance towards full-grown beauty which I seem to notice in Margery and Lottie."

The two girls, who were quite pretty, and who of course knew that they were, giggled; but their mother was neither to be diverted from her point nor preserved from the disappointment which her son foresaw that he would have to inflict upon her.

"Dear Cyril!" she returned; "as if you didn't know that you can't be more glad to be with us than we are to have you! It's kind of Sir Martin and Lady Constantia to remember that you have belongings too. Did they—er—send us any message?"

Now, the fact was that they had not only omitted so ordinary a courtesy, but had never, directly or indirectly, manifested any trace of the kindly remembrance attributed to them. That Lady Constantia should have ignored the existence of her cousins by marriage was not surprising; but Cyril had sometimes wondered why Sir Martin, habitually so thoughtful of others, should have imitated her in that respect. As, however, there was not the remotest probability that his mother and sisters would be invited to stay at Kingsmoreton Court, the only thing to be done was to intimate as much and to make such excuses as could be made for a sorrow-stricken old couple who had ceased to receive visitors.

"Oh, well, we mustn't be greedy," said Mrs. Hadlow

philosophically. "For the girls' sake I should have liked some sort of recognition; but your time will come sooner or later, Cyril, and then, I am sure, you will lend us all a hand."

He had already done so, and hoped to continue doing so; for he could live quite comfortably upon a quarter of his splendid allowance. Later in the evening he was enabled to make his younger brother happy by undertaking to meet sundry Cambridge liabilities, hitherto unavowed, but which may have been, as the latter declared they were, unavoidable. Hubert, whose halcyon educational days were now almost at an end, was a pleasant-looking, well set-up young man of the type which our public schools and universities turn out annually by the hundred. Less handsome than Cyril, and of fairer complexion, he was very much better dressed, had a cheery disposition, nice manners and (it was hoped) sufficient in-

"Ah!" breathed the other regretfully. "Not that you would have relished a high stool in the City, though."

"No; but I shouldn't have sat upon one. I should have sat and worked at the identical table which is going to see a good deal of me for the next week or two, and I should have been abundantly satisfied. Well, we must take things as they come. By the way, what do you think of our new home?"

Hubert had no hesitation in replying that he thought it a most infernal hole. His previous holidays and vacations had been spent perforce abroad, and although he had always felt that dawdling through picture-galleries and consorting with slack foreigners was a sorry use to make of leisure which might have been devoted to sport or games, he had not grumbled much at what could not be helped. But a grubby little house in Chelsea was quite another matter, and he could see no reason why his mother should continue to reside in that locality now that the artistic traditions which had been its original recommendation were no longer of importance. In short, Cyril perceived that his family secretly expected rather more of him than it might be in his power to bestow. He perceived, further, with an inward shudder, what a terrible shattering of Spanish castles would have ensued, had Sir Martin taken him at his word. There must be no more volcanic eruptions on his part, he resolved; it was his plain duty to consume his own smoke, even if it lay beyond him to arrive at the total extinction of certain fires.

Meanwhile, he rejoiced exceedingly in a temporary reversion to old habits. The old incentives to labour could not, it was true, be revived; yet for the next fortnight he worked as hard as though he had not been deprived of them, and was scarcely seen, save at meal hours, by the rest of the household, who had their own friends and were beginning to have their own amusements and engagements. Not once during that enjoyable time did it occur to him that he ought to call upon Mrs. Spencer Hadlow until a reproachful little note from that lady reminded him of his promise.

“So you have been in London for ages, I hear,” she wrote, “and haven’t troubled yourself to look up your sister-in-law (I am a virtual and virtuous sister-in-law) yet. What manners! At home on Sundays from four o’clock till dinner-time, but any other day preferred. How about to-morrow at five?”

"Sit down," said she, after extending a small, jewelled hand to her visitor. "Why do you carry your hat into the room with you? You'll be bringing your mother or your nurse next! And now for the good excuse—or the bad one."

"It's a bad one," Cyril acknowledged. "I have been indulging in a positive debauch of work ever since I came up; I have done nothing but work, and—I simply forgot!"

Adela broke into one of her low, gurgling laughs. "And the worst of that is that it's true," she remarked. "What I value most in you is your brazen truthfulness."

"That really is a rather valuable quality, you know," Cyril pleaded.

"Oh, far above rubies! You treated them to a generous sample of it before you left Kingsmoreton, by all accounts. What wouldn't I have given to hear you haranguing the populace at the Market Hall!"

"The populace hadn't your keen perception of the ridiculous. They tried to drag me off the platform, and they would probably have kicked me out into the street if I hadn't got behind Rigby. Or was it Rigby who got in front of me? Upon second thoughts, I believe it was."

"Well, at any rate, you haven't been kicked out of Kingsmoreton Court."

"Not literally; Sir Martin's forbearance was wonderful. Nevertheless—here I am, you see."

"Yes; but that only proves that you are indispensable and inexpugnable. You are given leave

to do anything you like, except desert the ship; you are only entreated to go away for a time and cool down."

"It isn't so much that as that Sir Martin can't believe I am in earnest. I suppose he is right; I suppose if I were really in earnest, I should desert the ship, as you say. However that may be, I have determined to leave politics alone for the future."

"Poor fellow! Does it hurt much?"

"It does a little—not unendurably. The fact is that I have a mother and a couple of sisters and a six-foot brother whom it would be hardly fair to jettison."

"I see them from here, with their open beaks sticking out of the nest. And what did Mabel think of it all?"

"I can't tell you; I hadn't the courage or even

forgotten me, which is more than any lover has done ever since the world began. It will all come right about Mabel, whom you certainly haven't forgotten, or you wouldn't have blushed at the sound of her name. Oh yes, you really did blush. Not in the usual unbecoming way, because you have one of those thick skins which go with certain kinds of dark hair; but I saw it in the whites of your eyes."

"Really," exclaimed Cyril, laughing, "there's nothing that you don't see! You know more about me than I know about myself."

It was not at all unlikely that she did. In any case, she soon heard from his own lips all that there was to be told respecting his present manner of life and his plans for the immediate future. She possessed in a remarkable degree the faculty for evoking confidences which is supposed to be one of the prerogatives of her sex, and if she did not always understand what was said to her, she invariably looked as if she did. Cyril's idea of her was that she might possibly be a trifle insincere, but that she was singularly quick-witted and sympathetic; so he expanded in her company as plants expand in a warm atmosphere. With her elbows on the arms of her chair and her chin resting in the hollow of one hand, she listened absorbedly to pæans in praise of art, and although she owned herself a complete technical ignoramus, she realised, or professed to realise, that with such an interest in life as that, a man might well prefer to hold aloof from politics or social functions.

"I'm coming to see you in your studio one of

these days," she abruptly announced after a time. "You might do a pen-and-ink study of me, by way of contrast to your Jacob Beer. Do you fancy yourself at portraits?"

"No," he answered; "I haven't the trick of catching facial expression. I should rather like to draw you as you are now, though, for the sake of the lines and the drapery."

"Then I'll go to Royal Avenue, lines, drapery and all," she declared. "It will be an excuse for meeting; for I see how vain it would be to invite you to come here and meet smart people—I, who *do* possess the trick of interpreting facial expression! Shall I be conventional and call on your mamma at the same time?"

Cyril made the only reply that could be made, and a few days later Adela kept her word. Descend-

No wonder the anxious mother was pleased and grateful; no wonder she turned a smiling countenance towards her son, saying:

"Do you hear that, Cyril? I always told you that straitened means didn't necessarily imply Royal Avenue, and at least we can house ourselves now without insisting upon a room that is capable of being used as a studio."

"That reminds me," observed Adela, rising, "that while there is a studio I must take advantage of it. I don't want to miss my one chance of being immortalised."

She explained that her portrait was to be executed by an artist whose etchings were destined to achieve undying fame, and asked: "Will you come up with us, if you think we ought to have a chaperon?"

The elder lady laughed and excused herself on the plea of an appointment for which she was already late. Perhaps she thought that the couple whom she was forsaking were very well able to take care of themselves, and if she did think so, she was not far wrong. Adela, at any rate, enjoyed that reputation, together with a name for making herself at home under all circumstances which she proceeded to justify, as soon as she had been conducted to Cyril's bare workshop at the top of the house, by divesting herself of her hat and jacket, sinking into the only armchair and lighting a cigarette.

"Now fire away," said she. "Leave out the smoke, though, or you'll convey false impressions to posterity. What I stand for—or at least sit for—is graceful

languor, combined with high gentility. As a study of those attributes, am I worth while?"

"In that pose you're worth anything to a capable draughtsman," answered Cyril, surveying her critically; "but whether I have the capacity that you deserve is quite another question."

It was a question which interested her less than it did him. As she had candidly avowed, her ostensible wish to be portrayed by his deft pen was only a pretext for the renewal of an interrupted intimacy, and while he was bringing all his attention to bear upon the task that he had in hand, she elicited from him definite, if somewhat absent-minded, replies to various queries which she did not always put in an interrogative form.

"I think," she observed meditatively at length, by way of comment upon some of the information thus

bargain. For all that, I do give tidy little dinners, and I take care that nobody shall ever be bored at them. Consequently, if you would like to meet the Prime Minister or the President of the Royal Academy or the newest South African bouncer or the last American duchess, you have only to say so."

He was to discover later that the boast was not unwarranted; but neither then nor at any time did her undeniable social prominence make much appeal to him. What he liked in Adela was her swift, unflinching comprehension. Perhaps she laughed a little at some of his notions; but if she did, her amusement was of the kind which implies amity and a measure of fellow-feeling, and every now and then she amused him in return by shrewd and original comments. To achieve a satisfactory likeness of her was, as he speedily recognised, rather beyond him; but they conversed together with mutual satisfaction for the best part of an hour, and would have gone on longer, had not Hubert interrupted them by marching in unceremoniously, pipe in mouth.

The intruder, taken aback by the quite unexpected sight of a lady in his brother's den, reddened and begged pardon; but Adela, to whom the acquisition of a new male acquaintance never came amiss, set him completely at his ease in a very few minutes. She knew—the astonishing little lady!—all about the recent boat race and the inter-University sports; she mentioned the winners of the several events by name, suggesting reasons for their victories, and quite won Hubert's heart by her intelligent appreciation of

contests which not one woman in ten ever hears about.

"Rather!" he heartily responded when, on preparing to depart, she asked him whether he could be persuaded to come with his brother and dine in Sloane Gardens; "I should like it most awfully."

"And I like him most awfully," Adela said, mimicking the young man's voice, on the doorstep, whither Cyril presently accompanied her; "though he isn't a bit like you. So nice and fresh and clean!"

"Thank you very much," answered Cyril; "I am nasty and dirty, no doubt."

"No; but you're a different type. Oh, a vastly superior one, if it comes to that; only one can't help adoring youth. It's almost a pity that Mabel Penrose is irrevocably booked to you; your brother and she would have been so admirably matched, and with her fortune, which you don't need, she might have pro-

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at the idea of his espousing the widowed Adela; yet—how or why he knew not—there flashed into his mind for the first time, while he laughed, a conviction that the only woman whom he would ever wish to make his wife was Mabel Penrose.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. SPENCER'S LITTLE DINNER

"THE only essential thing about a husband," said Lady Tilehurst didactically, "is that he should have at least five thousand a year. Good looks, good temper, good breeding and so forth are luxuries, not necessities. If you can't get them at home, nothing—least of all a husband—prevents you from going farther afield in search of them."

"Five thousand a year isn't much," Violet Ord
observed.

thing in reason. What sickens me is that you really don't seem to have the smallest self-respect."

"That is the sort of defect that would naturally shock you," remarked Violet. "I don't quite know how I have exhibited it, though."

"Why, by behaving as if you were independent, as if you were in your own house and could take your own time. People who can't even pay for the clothes that they have on their backs——"

"That will do, thanks," interrupted Violet; "I have heard that once or twice before."

The poor girl heard it almost every day; for Lady Tilehurst—the famous, charming, all-conquering Lady Tilehurst—was by no means the same person in the privacy of home life that she was in the high circles of which she had been for some years an acknowledged leader. A vicious, ungenerous woman, to speak the plain truth about her, whose leadership, such as it was, had already become precarious by reason of her open indiscretions and whose beauty was fading with a rapidity which did not improve her temper. About her, as about many others of similar social prominence, endless scandalous stories were current; but what made her unique was that in her case they were all true. Wonder was often expressed that Lord Tilehurst did not divorce her, and it may be that some such wonder occasionally flitted across his lordship's own dull mind; but he probably did not care to face the ordeal of cross-examination at the hands of a pitiless barrister, and he had been heard to say that, after all, Ida gave a man no trouble, apart from her infernal extravagance. He himself was a negligible person, of considerable

wealth and unobtrusively coarse tastes, with whom such reputable relatives as his aunt, Lady Constantia Hadlow, had long ceased to hold communication. Lady Constantia, it is needless to add, would neither speak to Lady Tilehurst nor hear her spoken of; but of course the hostility of an old woman who lived down in Devonshire all the year round and knew nobody was a matter of small importance. Unfortunately, there were other old women, less tolerant and less obscure, who were beginning to mutter that the line must be drawn somewhere, and Lady Tilehurst was uneasily conscious of a recent slackening in the stream of her daily invitations. That also did not improve her temper, and was accountable, perhaps, for the asperity of her next remark.

“You’re dining with Adela Hadlow to-night, aren’t you? Why hadn’t she the decency to ask me?”

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affectionate greetings with her, she foresaw that Bob was her inevitable fate at the dinner-table, for Adela, whose guests were always selected with intention, could not have made choice of him on any other ground. It was therefore a great surprise and relief to find herself being escorted downstairs presently by a particularly nice-looking youth, with a bright smile and sleek brown hair, who had been introduced to her as Mr. Hubert Hadlow. So much so that she could not help exclaiming :

“If I were the Royal Humane Society, you should have a gold medal !”

“What for ?” inquired her surprised cavalier.

“For saving me from being dragged down by one of these horrors,” she replied.

“That’s awfully flattering to me,” Hubert remarked ; “but are the other fellows horrors ? I was just thinking what a well turned-out lot they were.”

Miss Ord had only noticed one of them. She took stock of the rest on reaching the dining-room, where two round tables had been laid, and noted with joy, while she and her companion seated themselves at the first of these, that Bob Luscombe was motioned towards the second, over which Adela presided.

“Good !” she murmured. “I must say that things are always cleverly contrived in this house. Well turned-out we may be, the whole sixteen of us ; but we’re rather a scratch pack, so it was prudent to divide us into halves until meat and drink had mellowed us all. You and I belong to the mere youth and beauty section ; our betters at the other table, who will begin to look at us with longing eyes after the champagne

has been twice round, stand for high distinction. At least, with one exception they do."

"I hope my poor brother isn't the one exception," said Hubert.

"He? Oh no; he's a great artist, isn't he?"

"Well—he is an artist."

"Then if he isn't great already, Adela will very soon make him so." She caught Cyril's eye at the moment and nodded smilingly in acknowledgment of his bow. "I met your brother not long ago in Devonshire, where I was staying with my uncle Mr. Penrose," she went on. "Has he told you that he is going to marry Mabel Penrose?"

"Rather not! On the contrary, he told me that I was. This is an uncommon nasty knock to get just as one was shaping plans for a life of dignified ease with an attractive heiress. Do you mean to say that that ruffianly old Cyril was pulling my leg all the time?"

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"You can't know even by hearsay. Only women know, and they don't tell. Suppose we talk about something else."

They developed a rapid mutual liking while talking about a variety of other subjects, with periodical reversions to the one which poor Violet could seldom forget. More than once in the course of an artless, disjointed colloquy did she wish that her neighbour were possessed of the prescribed five thousand a year; for, like Adela, she found him "nice and fresh and clean," a delightful contrast to the elderly scamps whom she had enraged her sister by rejecting. To say that her heart was touched would be asserting far too much. She doubted whether she had a heart, in the sentimental acceptation of that term, nor, if she had had one, would she have dared to let it get out of hand. Hubert, however, whom Nature had dowered with the above organ in a healthy condition of susceptibility, was by no means so immune. He thought Miss Ord, to use his own unspoken phrase, "out of sight the jolliest girl he had ever come across," and if the adjective does not sound specially apposite, allowance must be made for the stunted vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon youth, in which one word has perforce to do duty for a score.

He was, at all events, sufficiently smitten to experience an absurd but distinct sensation of discomfiture on hearing that the young lady was already as good as betrothed to his Cambridge friend Luscombe, a fellow who was all very well in his way, but whom nobody could dream of calling worthy of her. This false information reached him upon no

less an authority than that of Bob Luscombe himself, whom he had not seen in the drawing-room and who had been placed behind his back at dinner, but who sat down beside him as soon as the ladies had retired.

"I say, young fellow," Bob began jocosely, after greetings had been exchanged, "I've a bone to pick with you. What do you mean by making up to my girl, eh?"

"Your girl!" returned Hubert, displaying the frank disgust which is one of the privileges of intimacy. "If it comes to that, what the deuce do you mean by calling Miss Ord your girl?"

Bob chuckled. He had had enough champagne, followed by port, to be exhilarated and expansive. "I mean," he replied, "that poachers will be prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law. Oh, of course you weren't really poaching; I'm not

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of fact, I suspect that was why Mrs. Spencer asked me to dine. Awfully good sort, Mrs. Spencer—what?”

Hubert assented, though with less enthusiasm than he might have exhibited had he not felt that Mrs. Spencer would have been an even better sort if she could have been contented to mind her own business. Well, the loves and quarrels of Luscombe and Miss Ord were certainly no business of his; so he joined his friend, by invitation, in a final glass of port, wished him joy and listened without visible ill humour to further confidences.

At the same time, he did not much care to resume conversation with a lady who was apparently not quite what he had taken her for; although, when he went upstairs with the other men, she openly beckoned to him to approach. For the rest, Bob jostled him aside without ceremony before he could obey and was seated close to Violet before she could escape.

“Look here; I’m sorry I put your back up that evening at Mannington,” the contrite wooer announced, “and it shan’t occur again. A man can’t say more than that, can he?”

“A man needn’t say as much unless he likes,” Violet answered. “When things offend me I generally take good care that they shall not occur again.”

“But do you accept my apology or don’t you?” demanded her admirer, who was more accustomed to fighting than apologising.

She made an eloquent grimace. Gladly would she

have responded with a round and resolute negative; but a conviction that she had better accept anything short of his hand, and confidence in her power to restrain him from offering that for some time to come, led her to temporise.

“Oh, if you’re sorry, you’re sorry, and there’s an end of it,” she returned impatiently. “What brings you here? I thought you hated London.”

“So I do; but there’s somebody in London whom I love to see,” replied Bob, with an amorous grin. “I’m selling some horses at Tattersall’s on Monday too,” he added. And then, after a pause, “I say, do you think Lady Tilehurst would receive me if I called?”

“I am quite sure she wouldn’t,” Violet declared; “Ida never receives anybody at this time of year, except by appointment.”

“Well, how about making an appointment?”

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some pains, she gained, was a respite. By dint of judiciously mingled snubs and cajoleries she drove the notion into his thick head that she was not won yet and might be lost through precipitancy. He likewise gathered that a host of engagements which she could not break must prevent him from obtaining anything more than rare and fugitive glimpses of her if he stayed in London, and she assured him that she would certainly be at Mannington again by July, allowing him to infer that he would find her more approachable then.

Presently her hostess came to her rescue. Adela, whose veiled, sleepy eyes saw everything that took place within their range, had not failed to note Mr. Luscombe's heightened colour, and as she knew from of old that he was apt to be choleric in his cups, she judged the moment appropriate for effecting a change of partners. Personally, she disliked the man; but she could make herself pleasant to him, as to all sorts and conditions of men, and indeed he was under the impression that she was a staunch ally of his. She therefore detached him without difficulty from the grateful Violet, who forthwith renewed her signal to Hubert.

"Why don't you come when you are called?" she asked reproachfully, after the young man had drawn near. "A little bit of alacrity on your part would have saved me."

"For the second time in one evening?" asked Hubert, undisguisedly pleased. "But how was I to know that you wanted to be saved from Luscombe?"

"As if it were possible to have any other wish

in connection with him! Perhaps he is a friend of yours, though."

"Well, in a sort of a way he is. We have always got on together all right, and he asked me just now to go down and stay with him in the summer."

"Did he? Then for mercy's sake come, and be my shield and buckler!"

"I will like a shot; though I was coming anyhow for my own sake. Will you be with your relations there?"

She made a gesture of assent. "If I possessed a home—which I don't—it would be Mannington. I only wish I were there now; but I have got to go through the season to the bitter end because—well, for family reasons which wouldn't interest you. I daresay the London season doesn't interest you much either."

"It's a sealed book to me," Hubert confessed.

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he wouldn't be here. Shockingly rich and a great patron of art. Invited for your brother, most likely."

"And is that Lady Oswestry prodding him in the back with her fan?"

"Oh no; Adela never asks husbands and wives on the same evening. The fat woman who can't manage to attract his attention is Madame de Roubloff. She poses as a Revolutionist, but is really in the pay of the Russian Government, they say. Lord Oswestry poses as a Radical and a philanthropist; so she probably thinks he is game for a subscription to what she darkly calls The Cause."

After a few more of the ladies and gentlemen present had been rapidly described for his instruction, Hubert asked, "And you, yourself? Are you one of the smart ones?"

Violet pondered. "Well—am I? In a faint and reflected fashion perhaps I am, because of my sister. But I have no ambition that way; I should like to be——"

"What would you like to be?" Hubert inquired, as she left her sentence unfinished.

"Oh, I don't know. A peeress in my own right, or a merry peasant—or you. Something cheerful and independent of that sort."

"But I am not independent."

"Aren't you? Well, you're cheerful, anyhow. I can't imagine you contemplating self-destruction."

The resolute advance of a young man who had been hovering in the vicinity for some minutes prevented Hubert from ascertaining whether Miss Ord

ever felt tempted to resort to such extreme measures, and he saw no more of her until she wished him a friendly good-night on her way out of the room.

"I'm awfully sorry for that poor girl," he told his brother, while they were walking homewards together. "From what she said, I expect she'll be bullied into marrying Luscombe, and she can't bear the sight of him."

"Oh, she puts it like that, does she?" said Cyril. "I don't know who is going to bully her, except Luscombe himself, and she has probably strength enough to resist him if she chooses. What I dare say she won't be quite strong enough to resist is the temptation of sharing his income."

"I don't suppose you know much about her," rejoined Hubert, with some warmth, and embarked upon a tirade against the vulgarity of cheap sneers, to which his brother, whose thoughts were otherwise

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Hubert, laughing, "please command me. Why not suggest to the old boy that you have a younger brother who wouldn't object at all to being his heir?"

"I wish to Heaven I could! Anyhow, I have more than half a mind to run over to Paris and finish that series for Lord Oswestry, pay or no pay. I should love the job, and it would be a good excuse for prolonging my leave of absence from Kingsmoreton. Now, Hubert, here's your chance. You are going to stay with Luscombe, he tells me. Profit by the occasion to pay your respects to Sir Martin and Lady Constantia and your addresses to Miss Penrose. Win all their hearts, cast me into the shade, and earn the eternal gratitude of a humble artist who only asks permission to pursue his calling unmolested."

CHAPTER XII

THE RETURN OF THE TRUANT

ON a sultry July day Cyril Hadlow quitted the classic shades and glades of Barbizon after a hilarious fortnight spent there with French artists, comrades of his student days, and set forth to tramp through the forest of Fontainebleau on his way to the railway station, whither his luggage had preceded him. To complete the series of etchings, representing wood-land scenes in the neighbourhood of Paris, which Lord Oswestry coveted, had been for him a labour

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reached him from other quarters, that for the future the work of his own hands might be relied upon to provide him with a steady income. What reward more gratifying than appreciation has this world to bestow upon a conscientious craftsman, unless it be consequent independence?

Progressing at a leisurely pace beneath overarching greenery and across sandy undulations, Cyril looked back upon the incidents of the past two months with a gratification which was nearly—not quite—unmixed. Social London, made accessible to him by the good offices of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow and the hospitality of Lord and Lady Oswestry, had been pleasant enough; this unforeseen renewal of former ties and discarded habits had been pleasanter still; pleasant had been Sir Martin's letters, telling him that, although he was missed, he must on no account curtail his holiday, and pleasant the thought that if he could not be independent in the fullest sense of the term, he was at least no longer an adopted pauper.

There was, however, one thought which gave him no pleasure at all, and which had haunted him with irritating persistency ever since it had first taken shape as the result of mere banter between him and his brother. This was the altogether absurd one that in Mabel Penrose he had encountered the one woman of his dreams. It was absurd, for any number of good reasons. In the first place, she was not the woman of his dreams, nor anything like that vague being; secondly, she was the embodiment of traditions and prejudices which he would never be able to assimilate; moreover, to skip thirdly, fourthly and the rest, he really

was not in love with the girl. He had told himself as much so often that the assertion had lost something of its original force, and of course, if he did not love her, the extreme repugnance that he felt to the idea of her marrying anybody else was rather difficult to explain; still he tried the effect of repeating it once more. Then he demanded of the rocks and trees whether they had ever beheld so ridiculous a spectacle as a man in doubt whether he had lost his heart or not, and their impassivity seemed to imply that they never had. Young women, it is said (though proof is lacking), are sometimes ignorant of the state of their own affections; but surely such uncertainty is not a masculine attribute! Well, he was going straight back to Kingsmoreton now, and doubtless he would soon discover whether he was the ass that he half took himself for or not. Unfortunately, the discovery that he did love Mabel would prove him beyond all

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to my old-fashioned ideas, a man with your expectations ought not to work for hire; but I quite understand your thinking that he ought, so I am glad for your sake that your holiday has been a busy one."

"One likes to feel that there are some outlets for energy at which one isn't a complete bungler," Cyril pleaded.

"That's why I congratulate you — as well as Oswestry. And I daresay you won't mind my congratulating myself upon having you and your energies home again."

"Oh no; I'm only astonished that you should," answered Cyril, "and a little ashamed. But I'm going to behave better; I shall never be seen or heard on a platform again."

"We have forgotten that you ever were," Sir Martin declared; "don't remind us of it."

"I won't," Cyril promised, perceiving to whom in particular that needless admonition was meant to apply.

But if, as was probable, Lady Constantia had forgotten nothing, her reception of the returned wanderer was a shade less chilling than might have been anticipated. Of course she was not glad to see him back; but perhaps she was thankful to him for having remained so long away, and in any case he fancied that she had now the air of accepting him as inevitable. She even unbent so far as to hope that he had enjoyed himself during his absence.

"If I didn't know that my dear mother-in-law was blessed with a cast-iron constitution," remarked

Adela, who had recently arrived from London, "I should wonder whether she wasn't beginning to break up. She treated you almost amiably this evening, and she was positively playful with your brother when he came over the other day."

"Is Hubert staying with Luscombe, then?" asked Cyril.

His informant nodded. "Yes, and if you don't take care, he'll eclipse you all round. Mabel already adores him."

"I thought very likely she would."

"Did you indeed? Perhaps you also thought it likely that the old people here would fall in love with him at first sight and scarcely disguise their regret that he is your junior."

"They can't regret it more than I do, and I should be the last to blame them for recognising what is so obvious—that he is the very man for them, whereas

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it. Money and position say little to me; I am not fond of country life or country sports, and of course I can't pretend to be fond of Lady Constantia, who hates me."

"Oh, I daresay she would hate your brother if he were promoted to be the heir. That won't happen; because nothing is more sacred to Sir Martin than the principle of primogeniture, except his word, which has been given to you."

"I'll release him from it to-morrow."

"You won't get the chance. Do you know, I am not sure that I admire your self-effacement. It has a noble sound; but isn't it, saving your presence, a little bit like funk? You knew when you came here that you weren't going to have a walk over; but you were full of pluck then; you meant to face all the difficulties of the situation and conquer them. Which inspired me to back you up instead of putting spokes in your wheels, as I might have done. How about the claims of a modest partisan? Doesn't it strike you that you owe me any consideration?"

Cyril responded at once to an appeal which was not ill conceived.

"I owe you much more than I can hope to repay," he acknowledged, "including the introduction to Lord Oswestry which has caused me to wax fat and kick. You are quite right; it isn't in the least noble or unselfish to shirk what one has deliberately undertaken, and I won't forsake Sir Martin, although I still say that he is entitled and welcome to forsake me."

Adela swung herself to her feet, laughing, and

tossed away the end of her cigarette. "Sir Martin," said she, "will never forsake Mr. Micawber. But really and seriously I can't answer for Mabel Penrose's fidelity if you neglect her much longer. To-morrow afternoon I am going to drive you over to Stawell Abbey to tea. You will find her there, feebly attempting to round up young Luscombe and Violet Ord, who will have given her the slip. Then you and she can fight it out, or plunge into one another's arms, or both, I'll make it my business to detach the too fascinating Hubert."

On the following day her word was kept and her prediction was verified to the letter. After a rather long drive through deep lanes and across steep hills, surmounted by the simple Devonian and ancient Roman plan of going straight up one side and down the other, the visitors from Kingsmoreton reached Stawell Abbey, a vast, rambling mansion to which

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Adela, glancing at Cyril out of the corner of her eye, remarked: "Now you had better go and look for your brother, who is looking for Mabel, who is looking for other people who aren't in a hurry to be found. Quite like the house that Jack built, isn't it? I don't think I will start to look for you until I have had my tea; but I may be expected in due course."

Mrs. Luscombe showed her sanction of a flirtation to which she had become reconciled by simpering idiotically. Violet Ord, to be sure, was no great catch; but, on the other hand, it is such a steadying thing for a young man to be enamoured of a girl belonging to his own class! Dimly suspicious, however, of the difficulty of classifying the notorious Lady Tilehurst's sister, she was particularly anxious to question Mrs. Spencer, who knew all about everybody, upon this subject; so she said:

"Well really, Mr. Hadlow, if you don't mind, it would be very good of you to let them know that tea is ready. You won't find them at the stables, I am afraid, but I daresay one of the grooms will tell you which way they went."

It was only after the expiration of a full half-hour that Cyril, in patient compliance with instructions received, came upon his brother and Miss Penrose emerging from one of the shrubberies near the house, to which a devious pursuit had led him, and at the same moment Adela strolled up from another direction to join the group.

"So much the best way of playing hide-and-seek is to sit still," she observed. "I didn't stir until

I knew that you must be heading for tea. The consequence of my having finished mine is that one of you will have to go fasting a little longer. Yes, you, Mr. Hubert. I'm sorry; but the time has come for you to fulfil your pledge, and I can't let you off. Your brother," she added, turning to Cyril in explanation, "is going to conduct me round the stables, so that I may know what is the right thing to say about all these animals and avoid exasperating their owner when he has them stripped for my edification."

Hubert, who had saluted his elder brother after the undemonstrative British fashion, appeared to be no reluctant victim. Adela and he were soon out of sight, and then Mabel said:

"I am glad to see you back at last. Why did you turn and fly the country immediately after striking out such a very original line for your-

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hours that I have been accused of cowardice," remarked Cyril. "Mrs. Spencer was as hard upon me as you are because I ventured to suggest that things would be more comfortable all round if Sir Martin could be induced to adopt Hubert in my place and give me the coveted order of the sack. Yet I should have thought that there was more moral courage in acknowledging a palpable failure than in blundering ahead with one's eyes shut."

Mabel looked puzzled. "But are you a failure?" she asked. "Sir Martin, I know, doesn't think at all the worse of you for siding with people who, after all, had a sort of a grievance."

"Oh, he's generous; he can afford to be, because he knows perfectly well how futile my antics were. Still he must have thought them in shocking bad taste, and so, I am sure, did you."

The truthful maiden was fain to admit that something like that might have been her criticism, had she permitted herself to express one. However, she withdrew the graver charge. "Of course, if you were convinced that you had acted mistakenly, you hadn't any views left to stick to."

"Well, I am convinced that it was a mistake for the heir to the estate to act as I did; I am not at all convinced that I hold mistaken views."

She read him a little lecture upon the subject of some of his views which both amused and provoked him, although he was inconsistent enough to rejoice that orthodoxy had so stout a champion in her. Women ought to be religious: what man does not instinctively feel that when they are irreligious they

are in a parlous state? Cyril would have preferred to be reproached for having gone away without wishing Miss Penrose good-bye; but since she did not seem to have noticed or resented that breach of good manners on his part, he could hardly ask pardon for it. Upon the whole, she disappointed him, strictly moderate as his expectations had been. That she still liked him very well, if not quite so well as at first, but that she was leagues removed from loving him, was neither surprising nor depressing: what had to be qualified as both was the certitude—it practically amounted to certitude now—that he did not love her. She was good, she was sensible, she was even beautiful, in her white dress against a background of dark green foliage, with slant rays of sunlight turning her chestnut hair to gold; but—hang it all! why not face the truth?—she was more than a little commonplace.

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indeed," she returned, with just a shade of defiance in her voice; "everybody does, I think. But you need not grudge him his popularity; he isn't very enviable in any other way that I know of."

"I grudge him nothing," Cyril curtly declared.

Individuals, like nations, can get very near to quarrelling while firmly resolved to keep the peace, and it was just as well that a colloquy which threatened to become subacid was interrupted at this point by Bob Luscombe's powerful voice, calling out:

"Hullo! haven't you set to work to worry the muffins yet? That's all right; then there'll be the more left for us, and I'm jolly hungry, I can tell you!"

Bob, in high good humour and with something of a victor's swagger, was marching along beside Adela, whom he had joined in the stableyard. Hubert followed at a slower pace with Violet, and perhaps if Cyril could have overheard what passed between the latter couple, he might have felt less like Esau in the presence of Jacob than he did.

"What is the use," Violet was fretfully asking, "of repeating over and over again what I know much better than you do? Did you ever watch a stoat hunting a rabbit? The rabbit is always caught in the end, though it has twice the other's speed."

"That's because the rabbit never believes it can escape," Hubert observed.

"Very likely it is. What then?"

"Well, human beings are supposed to have rather more sense than rabbits, aren't they? I can't think

that I should ever submit to be gobbled up against my will."

"You are a man, which makes all the difference. Not that men aren't gobbled up by the dozen every year; only perhaps they don't realise that it happens against their will. However, I'll admit, if you like, that I shall have myself to thank for anything that may happen to me. I am still free, and of course I can't be compelled to part with my freedom."

"Don't, then!—for your own sake, don't!" Hubert adjured her, with great earnestness.

"Oh, it will be for my own sake if I do, certainly not for anybody else's; so you won't need to waste good pity upon me, come what may."

The above fragment of dialogue will serve to show that Hubert had at least not wasted the opportunities afforded to him of cultivating intimate relations with

CHAPTER XIII

VIOLET'S MASK

"I HOPE you enjoyed your afternoon," said Mabel, addressing her cousin, who was seated beside her in the phaeton which she was driving, and who had not spoken once since their departure from Stawell Abbey.

"Yours," returned Violet sardonically, "is a sanguine disposition."

"Anyhow," the other pursued, "Bob appeared to have enjoyed himself."

"He must enjoy being snapped at, then. But, really, I believe he does. I remember his telling me once that the way he brought a dog under control was to tease the poor brute until it flew at him and then administer a sound thrashing."

"I doubt whether he would find that plan succeed, except with curs. Has he been teasing you to-day?"

"Oh, I'm not his dog yet. For the present I do the teasing and the snapping as well. Probably he thinks that's no reason why he shouldn't use the whip when his turn comes."

"His turn," Mabel asserted, with a greater show of confidence than she felt, "will never come!"

"*Qui vivra verra,*" was the only answer that she obtained.

When Violet was disinclined to be communicative, neither rebukes nor blandishments had the least effect upon her, and her companion, knowing this by experience, desisted after a few minutes from leading remarks which were received in dead silence. Yet it was difficult to be patient with the girl, and still more difficult to make out what she would be at. If she did not mean to marry Bob Luscombe, who behaved as if he had already been accepted, and whose mother openly spoke of the engagement as imminent, why prolong a condition of things which was daily growing more and more fraught with peril to everybody concerned? Hubert Hadlow was visibly concerned, and had been for ten days past—visibly, at least, to all except foolish Mrs. Luscombe and her still more foolish son. If, on the other hand,

"No; only we shall have an explosion, I am afraid. There is one imaginable way out of it," Mabel continued meditatively. "Not a way of averting the explosion, but a way of saving Violet, which would quite console me for any scorching I might get in consequence. You see, it's pretty certain that Mr. Hubert Hadlow cares for her——"

"The deuce he does! Why, the young scamp hasn't enough to keep himself, let alone an expensive wife!"

"And although one can never be sure of anything with Violet, I suspect that she cares for him. Oh yes, I know it would be out of the question as matters stand, but do let me finish! Mr. Cyril Hadlow was at Stawell this afternoon, and——"

"He's back, is he? And what had he to say for himself?"

"Not much for himself; but he had something to say for his brother, which I have been thinking over since. He has never wished to inherit Kingsmoreton; he feels that, with his tastes and notions, he is a fish out of water there, and he sees, as everybody must, that his brother is simply made for the position. Now, if Sir Martin were to alter his will——"

"Oh, this won't do!—this won't do at all!" interrupted Mr. Penrose, who had silently acquiesced in quite another project, and was not disposed to see it wrecked. "Upon my word, I thought you had more common sense, Mabel. Personally, I should say that Violet might do a great deal worse than take Bob Luscombe; she's her own mistress, though,

and she can please herself. But when it comes to robbing other people for the sake of bringing together a boy and girl, who would be as likely as not to fight like cat and dog if they were married, I must put my foot down."

"But not on me, I hope," said Mabel, smiling. "I only mentioned this as a possible loophole for Violet; of course I can't take any step towards providing her with it."

"Well, well!" rejoined Mr. Penrose, somewhat reassured; "let us mind our own business, then."

No doubt he thought he was paying proper attention to his when he presently added:

"I should be the last to deny that Cyril Hadlow played the fool when that mischief-making rascal Rigby was here; but I daresay he has seen the error of his ways and, taking him all round, he isn't what I should call a fool."

through complications of her own creating. Being an old man and a sensible one, he knew that intervention in other people's affairs must, if it is to be effective, be peremptory and backed by authority. He was not prepared to warn Hubert Hadlow off the premises, nor, in the event of his adopting that strong measure, would he be able to prevent Violet from meeting the young fellow elsewhere.

As a matter of fact, Violet met the young fellow every day of her life, Bob never failing to make an appointment for the morrow before he took leave of his destined prey. For the ensuing morning he had arranged that Miss Ord should have her first introduction to otter-hunting, and the two girls found him waiting for them with Hubert when, at the advertised hour of eleven o'clock, they reached the trysting-place. This was an ancient stone bridge, beneath the single arch of which a clear, brown stream brawled downwards through overhanging woods on its course from the moor to the sea. The pack—composed chiefly of foxhounds, for the old otter-hound is fast disappearing—was gathered together in an adjacent meadow, surrounded by a tolerably numerous field, and the blue-coated Master, after glancing at his watch, at once gave the signal for a move.

"Beastly crowd," remarked Bob, eyeing the assemblage with some disfavour; "that's the worst of meeting anywhere within reach of tourists and trippers at this time of year. However, I daresay we shall soon choke 'em off, if we have the luck to find."

It used to be thought great and unmerited luck to find an otter at any hour after the dew was off the grass; but now that more attention is paid to information received and to the exact location of holts, it is no longer indispensable that scent should be fresh. Consequently, the convenience of ladies can be studied by those who wish to study it, and on this occasion the ladies had not long to wait before hounds threw their tongues. A fine dog otter, dislodged from a drain by the terriers, took instantly to the water, and afforded excellent sport for more than an hour both up and down stream, the majority of the field plunging in, every now and again, to form in line and head him back by splashing vigorously with their poles. It was hot work under a blazing sun, and there was some rough scrambling to be done even by spectators who preferred to stick to dry land.

their privileges; but wisdom is hardly to be expected of a young man who is in love and who has been encouraged to believe that he may say what he likes. If Violet expected it of her companion she was unreasonable; but then again no wise person expects a woman of any age to be reasonable. As it was, lack of wisdom on one side and lack of reasonableness on the other introduced an element of discord into the relations of two people who had hitherto been rather dangerously happy together. Possibly Violet, recognising the danger, was more responsible for the discord than Hubert, whose notions of danger were not quite identical with hers. Be that as it may, she would not suffer him to renew warnings and entreaties which, to be sure, did not gain much from reiteration.

"If you only knew how maddening it is to be assured over and over again that two and two make four!" she exclaimed. "I don't remember ever saying that they made five; but if I had, I should stick to the assertion in spite of you. With your permission, or even without it, we'll drop the subject. I didn't come here to argue, I came to see what an otter-hunt was like."

"As far as I can judge," rejoined Hubert a little crossly, "it's a good deal like a rat-hunt; but I don't mind confessing that I didn't come out to see it. I came to see you."

"Well, here I am, and perhaps I should be enjoying the show if you would kindly explain it to me. Why aren't we tearing up and down the bank and mopping our faces, like everybody else?"

“We will if you choose,” answered Hubert; “we’ll take a flying leap into the river if you choose. Only there doesn’t seem to be any particular necessity for that.”

Violet, whose costume was not of the workmanlike kind adopted by her cousin, drew the line at wading: but she declared that she was eager to witness every incident of the run, and as the otter shortly afterwards took to the shore, breath was required for other purposes than that of speech. Scrambling up hill, as fast as their legs would carry them, over slippery boulders, through brambly thickets and across strips of treacherous morass, she and her escort could exchange no more than an occasional word until a check gave them much-needed repose, by which time the exercise had put them both into somewhat better humour.

“Well, what do you think of it?” Hubert asked.

He did not join in her hilarity; he did not see what there was to laugh at. He was uneasily suspicious that Violet had divined a secret which he had been at little pains to keep, uneasily afraid that she might be laughing at it and at him. But there was no time to interrogate her; for the hounds had now winded the otter again and were once more in full cry. After that until the kill, which was achieved gloriously in an open meadow high up on the edge of the moor, Hubert had enough to do in encouraging and assisting the well-nigh exhausted Violet, and of course he was as pleased as she when, in her character of a stranger, she was awarded the mask to which her cousin had a more legitimate claim.

The field had by this time become considerably thinned; but the witnesses of the finish included Sir Martin and Cyril, who had driven up in a dogcart just at the right moment, and the former, relying upon his knowledge of otters and localities, had very thoughtfully brought a luncheon basket with him. He did not, however, stay to partake of its contents with hungry hunters (since his last bereavement Sir Martin had avoided all such gatherings), but departed on foot, saying that the walk home would do him good, and leaving Cyril behind him as his representative.

Now Cyril was not in the mood for adequately representing anybody, least of all himself. He had not been asked to join this otter-hunt; he was certain that his company was not desired by persons who had rather pointedly omitted to mention it to him, and his one wish was to abandon them to their own devices as

soon as might be. Naturally, therefore, he gave one of them the impression that he had taken offence, which struck her as somewhat silly and ridiculous of him. She had seated herself on the grass beside Hubert, Violet and Bob having sought the shade of a neighbouring tree, and, looking up at him while he offered her meat and drink, she said, with something less than her usual amiability:

“I am sorry you came upon us just as we were killing. You thought it a disgusting exhibition, I suppose.”

Cyril shrugged his shoulders. “Very kind of you to say you are sorry,” he answered, “but of course you mean—and I quite agree with you—that it is I who ought to be sorry that I can’t see the fun of slaughtering harmless creatures.”

“My dear chap,” remonstrated Hubert, “if you owned a trout stream, you wouldn’t call otters harm-

to look with muddy boots, a dripping skirt, dishevelled hair and a wrecked hat. She was very good-natured, very broad-minded (at least, she hoped so) and quite willing to overlook bygone regrettable eccentricities; but she liked no better than anybody else does to be accused by implication of cruelty and hypocrisy, and of course it was both rude and false to assert that nothing would have shocked her in a bull-fight, except the novel spectacle of gored horses. Moreover, it was taking a little too much for granted to assume that she could be "distressed" by any particular individual's want of sporting proclivities. All these things being so, she abstained from further notice of Cyril, but was smilingly loquacious with Hubert—which was just what the elder brother had expected of her. She had been similarly engaged the whole morning, no doubt, he reflected, as he turned away.

There was nobody else for him to turn to, save the Master, who, having disposed of a few sandwiches, and being impatient to resume operations, audibly wondered whether the ladies expected hounds to be kept waiting for them all day. It was obvious that he did not care to talk to Cyril, who perceived that his share in the proceedings would be confined to presently collecting dirty plates, knives and forks and driving home with them. He therefore perched himself apart upon a mossy stone, lighted a cigarette and philosophically awaited his release.

This he soon obtained. The hounds moved on, followed by Mabel, Hubert and a diminished field; only Bob Luscombe and Violet remained seated

beneath their tree and showed no inclination to rise.

"Miss Ord is dead beat," Bob announced, in answer to Cyril's inquiring gaze; "so I'm going to chuck it and toddle home with her. Oh, *I* don't mind," he added, doubtless feeling that such self-abnegation required accounting for; "we've had one ripping good run, and that's enough for to-day. I'll tell you what you might do, Hadlow; you might drive round by Stawell—it isn't half a mile out of your road—and tell 'em to send a trap down to Mannington for me about five o'clock. Will you, like a good chap? Thanks awfully."

Thus dismissed, Cyril, aided by the groom, meekly packed up the luncheon basket and quitted the scene. He collided with a gate-post on turning into the high-road, and although no damage was done, the groom's subdued groan served him as an



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Nevertheless, it was that and nothing else, and a dim inkling of the truth deepened his vexation. Good heavens! what earthly difference would it have made if Hubert had been out of the way? And what if Mabel, with her slightly flushed cheeks and disordered hair, had stirred some vagrant chord in his fancy which had not chanced to be touched before? Artistic sensibility is a totally different thing from love.

CHAPTER .

THE INEVITAI

Who has not at one time or another had a precious gift of invisibility which is found in old-world fables? Of course not these lines nor anybody who would stoop to so despicable an action yet occasionally we may all have had on benevolent grounds and for the purpose to play the part of an unseen third person and Cyril would have liked very much to be near his brother and Mabel Peabody to make quite sure of what he was doing. Really it was a pity that if had that power been vouchsafed to them they have discovered that the couple interested were not making love but were trudging in the heat over heather and conversing with that laborious and is human to display towards the

now clean beyond reach of help or interference. However, they were just enough to impute no blame to one another and sensible enough to recognise silently that the inevitable must needs come to pass sooner or later, delayed though it may be by futile strategy.

They did not refer to the subject of their disturbed reflections, nor had Hubert the face to suggest that they should abandon a chase which seemed to hold out faint prospects of reward. He only ventured to remark, after a time, that this was rather weary work, and to add:

"I suppose you don't often find an otter in the afternoon, do you?"

"Oh, sometimes," answered Mabel resignedly; "there are quite half-a-dozen pools higher up to be tried yet. Are you tired of it?"

He certainly was, and so was she; but a sort of shamed feeling that they ought to persevere, and that, even should they desist, it would be a little ridiculous now to rush helter-skelter down to Mannington, stood in the way of a mutual avowal. So on they plodded, and never an otter nor trail of one did they strike until the sun began to slope towards the west, and the Master, an invincible optimist, had to acknowledge that there was no more to be done that day.

"Sorry you have had such a long tramp for nothing, Miss Penrose," said he cheerily; "I hoped we should have been able to show you some sport this afternoon, but one never knows. Your cousin was the wise one, after all."

their faces homewards.

“If I may, and if it won't be

“Oh, it won't be too late
dering whether the others
Stawell.”

“I don't suppose it makes
was Hubert's gloomy and som
joinder.

She gave him a sidelong glance
a rueful little smile. They u
well enough, though there h
between them of topics which
and Hubert was quite aware
dreading an alliance between
had found him a helpful all
and was right in thinking, that
and pity. More than that he
asmuch as no pauper could
threatened fate by the heroic
ing her.

After a rather long inter
said suddenly “”

Hubert shook his head and laughed unmirthfully. "Oh, I don't think so. In a sort of way she tells everybody everything; she makes no secret of what she wants—and what she doesn't want. But she has never told me what she means to do, and I shouldn't wonder if she herself didn't know."

"But it's impossible for her to go on much longer like that!"

"Well, I should think it might be a bit difficult; but she's jolly clever, you know. At all events, she'll end by doing whatever it is that she wants to do, I expect."

At this Mabel frowned. "You speak as if you didn't care what became of her," she remonstrated.

"Oh, I care, if that's any use. Only you know as well as I do, Miss Penrose, that it can't be."

It might be; but she did not push indiscretion so far as to point out how it might. Desirable as an exchange of parts between the brothers was in the abstract, it was hardly for an outsider to indicate that facile solution of several problems. Consequently, all Mabel said was :

"There are people who can marry for money and never repent of their bargain. The misfortune is that Violet isn't one of that sort."

"Perhaps she is one of the sort who always repent of any bargain," Hubert suggested, with quite unexpected acuteness.

He received no reassuring contradiction, and as at this point the path down the narrow valley dwindled to a track along which two pedestrians could not walk abreast, Mabel brushed on ahead

through the undergrowth, while conversation became intermittent and monosyllabic. It was nearly six o'clock when the pair, scrambling down a bank to reach the direct road to Mannington, were within an ace of being run over by a high gig, the occupant of which pulled up and gave vent to a joyous view halloa.

"Nicked you off neatly!" Bob Luscombe cried. "Well, what sport? None, eh? I thought as much. Never mind; better luck next time! Jump up, old man, and you shall have a lift home. That is, unless Miss Penrose would like me to drive her back to Mannington."

Miss Penrose, having expressed a preference for walking, was not urged to think better of it. Bob did not desire her company just then, whereas he was eager for that of his friend, to whom, almost

"You bet she did! But she had me down on all fours, promising Lord knows what, before she'd say Yes. Well, she's worth it. She's worth anything!"

Gazing with rapt eyes into vacancy, this very ordinary and coarse young man was transfigured into something akin to nobility of aspect by the divine passion which held him in grip and which fortunately rendered him independent of any encouragement on the part of his neighbour, who really could not at that particular juncture manage to think that Miss Ord was worth much.

"A London house?" Bob went on presently. "Well, why shouldn't she have one if she wants it? I can afford it all right, and though I don't care about London myself for more than a week at a time, there isn't such an awful lot to be done in the country after April, when you come to think of it."

"Was that the only condition she made?" Hubert inquired, after clearing his voice.

The other laughed aloud. "Rather not! But, dash it all! she shall have whatever she asks for, and welcome. As I always say, women are like mares, and if you think you can treat a mare the same as you would a horse, you're jolly well mistaken. They've got to be humoured or you'll do no good with 'em."

"I suppose they have."

"You may take my word for that; and I've had more experience than most men."

"Of women?"

"No, of mares; but it's the same thing. Well,

... and one, or a stingy one, ble

Further examples of the hap
glorification may be omitted.
Hubert enjoyed listening to h
understood by such readers as
misfortune to adore a lady quite
and still more readily by those w
to withdraw from that lady the
their respect.

Now it is utterly impossible to
woman who, for the sake of a
carriages, frocks and jewels, conse
wife of a man whom she does n
less love; and this was what the
told her cousin in so many words
information which awaited her r
boldly declared, in reply, that she

“When one is bound to jump
absurd to keep on refusing. May
as you ought to know.”

“You weren’t bound to jump
sorrowfullv

"He won't be a year or two hence. Besides, if he were, that would never be enough to make you happy."

"Oh, bother happiness! I don't think I believe much in happiness. What I do believe in, and what I am going to have, is peace and comfort and, above all, freedom."

"Do you really suppose that Bob Luscombe's wife will be free?"

"Well, I shall be free from Ida, at all events. Do you call that nothing?"

"I can understand its meaning a good deal; but I can't understand——"

"No, my dear Mabel, you can't," interrupted Violet impatiently; "so why try? I can tell you this for your comfort; I know perfectly well what I am about; I haven't made up my mind in a hurry, and I have reasons of which even you would approve if you heard them."

"I am certain I shouldn't," Mabel protested, with conviction.

"Then we needn't go into them. I am sorry that you should be shocked and pained and all the rest of it; but there's no help for that, and as my marriage is now quite unalterably decided upon, the time for remonstrances has gone by. Won't you, please, be nice about it, Mabel, and congratulate me, as everybody else will?"

"I am such a poor hand at making believe! I don't know that everybody else will congratulate you either."

"All the more reason why you shouldn't join a

flowers and palms and things."

While Mabel was rather unsuccessful in stimulating an interest in details which were of little avail, Cyril, seated on the balustrade of Kingsmoreton Court, was giving her a lesson in her behaviour at the otter-hunt. He was interested, always diverted Adela.

"It's a pity," he was saying, "that you are not here to see for yourself how I have got ahead and how completely my partner has got out of joint. I can't pretend to know; if the thing comes off, it will be a stroke of luck for Hubert from every point of view and though you would have it that I was your competitor, I never was in reality."

"Quite sure of that?" Adela inquired, her head slightly inclined to one side and a faint smile flickering about her lips.

"Absolutely sure. Well, I won't say I was at one time—just for a short time—just for a short time—you weren't all of you right;

myself to Miss Penrose, it is that she would refuse me if I did."

"Ah, how the green-eyed monster peeps out!"

"Upon my honour, I'm not jealous," asseverated Cyril, who would not have said that unless he had believed himself to be speaking the truth: "the only thing I lament is that I suppose I shall now have to seek some other more or less suitable bride. Which is rather a nuisance."

"And Mabel would have suited so admirably!"

"Because we shall some day own adjacent properties, do you mean? With the result that, if we married, one house or the other would have to stand empty. Is that such a strong recommendation? You are much too clear-sighted to imagine that there could be any other. My general attitude towards existence is so totally at variance with Miss Penrose's that I don't believe she even begins to understand what it is."

"Oh, if you insist upon being understood——!"

"It doesn't seem a very extravagant demand to make. Surely I'm simple enough!"

"You're as simple as the alphabet and a great deal simpler than the multiplication table. For all that, I'm afraid you'll always need explaining to women."

"Not to you, anyhow; you have read me like a book from the first. I suppose that proves you to be no ordinary woman."

"No," she answered, with the low, leisurely laugh which was in itself a sign of comprehension and which had become grateful to his ears, "I think it only

mentatively :

“That is the sort of effect that you produce upon the beloved object. Then she says that there’s any occasion for her to use me.”

“Possibly. The trouble is that I don’t like the object.”

Adela shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t like you. Apparently you weren’t quite so good as a book after all, for I really thought I could do with Mabel right enough. Well, if you won’t, and we must try, as you say, to find a substitute for her.”

To find a substitute for Mabel! He had never asked himself whether a substitute was a well-ascertained phenomenon in the world. In that a man who has just been crossed by a woman—although Cyril did not know it, he was a man of a peculiarly sensible to fresh impressions—Adela was at that moment so alluring.

“I have no eye for clothes,” he irrelevantly said, “but I have a nose for a woman.”

of about ten pounds. Paris indeed!—not for poor out-at-elbows me at the close of a horribly costly London season! Why, what do you suppose my blighted prospects have left me to live upon?”

He had not the least idea, nor did she tell him; for now a tall, black figure loomed up between the end of the terrace and the reddened western sky, at sight of which she sprang to her feet.

“Oh, here comes Constantia!” she exclaimed; “I’m off!” And in an instant she had vanished.

Lady Constantia advanced, with slow, deliberate steps, until she came to a standstill in front of Cyril, who wondered to what he owed so unprecedented a mark of attention. No explanation of it, however, was vouchsafed to him, and he was compelled, as usual, to be the first to open fire. This he did by inquiring whether Sir Martin had come in yet; a somewhat absurd question to put, considering that it was close upon seven o’clock.

“Hours ago,” answered Lady Constantia, staring at the inquirer for a second and then averting her woebegone eyes. “He is rather tired. It is not good for him to walk such long distances.”

“I wanted him to drive back,” Cyril pleaded, in deprecation of the implied reproof, “but he wouldn’t. He didn’t care about lunching with the otter-hunters, and somebody had to wait for the basket.”

Lady Constantia’s gaze was fixed upon a flight of noisy, manœuvring rooks. She made no rejoinder, but remarked abruptly, after a moment, “Your brother is a nice sort of boy.”

“As good a fellow as ever breathed,” Cyril loyally

sister, and I trust she is not; but I should be cautioned that she will not engage herself to him. A word spare him unhappiness."

"He has nothing to fear from Miss Cyril, somewhat amused; "I am not about Miss Penrose. Would she be a herself to him?"

Lady Constantia wheeled round upon with a swift frown. "Mabel!" she said then—"Oh, I see!"

What did she see? Her eyes were scanning the far horizon, and her mouth not appear to have any direct bearing subject under discussion.

"You have made great friends with her." "That is as you please; it is your affair had better not believe everything that she says."

"She has never told me anything but that." Cyril returned.

"It is not true that your brother is—"

sound, which may have been indicative of incredulity or displeasure, but which was not followed by any articulate comment. Quite a long time elapsed before she resumed, speaking in short, jerky sentences which had the effect of being forced out of her almost against her will:

“Adela is not straightforward. Everything she says or hints must be accepted with reservations. She is never without a motive. I make it a rule to say nothing behind people’s backs that I would not say to their faces, and you can repeat my words to her if you choose. Probably you will.”

“I shall certainly do nothing of the sort,” replied Cyril, with some warmth; “I am not a mischief-maker. But I think you are prejudiced and rather unjust.”

Lady Constantia did not look angry. “I am prejudiced,” she briefly acknowledged. “Nevertheless, you will remember what I have said, and it will be good for you to remember it.”

With that she turned and marched slowly away, leaving Cyril a good deal surprised. If Lady Constantia was unjust, he flattered himself that he was not, and he acquitted her of the desire to make mischief which he had disclaimed on his own score. But of course there was no more necessity to warn him against the good-natured Adela than there was to set Hubert on his guard against Violet Ord.

THE EBB TIDE

To weep and wail aloud over a world of dispelled illusions is the privilege of those whom fate has favored. Many have risen to fame by availing themselves thereof and have, it may be hoped, profited thereby; but the first instinct of the true man, and more particularly of the true man, is to suffer in silence. Two men, Hubert Hadlow, who was suffering from a broken heart, and Violet Ord, who had put a good face on what had happened to her, firstly, he had known all along that Violet Ord was an altogether hopeless case, secondly, although he worshipped her, he helped despising her. The truth was that he had treated her well, and when he remembered that she had craved counsel of him, claimed his help in a hundred ways fanned a flame which he had not been conscious of having kindled, and which had now grown hot. What he said to himself was that he could excuse a girl in Violet's situation.

portmanteau forthwith and join his mother and his sisters in the Isle of Wight. Luscombe expected him to spend at least another month at Stawell, and he was not going to gratify or amuse or surprise anybody by a precipitate retreat.

On the following day, therefore, he drove over to Mannington with his friend to proffer cheerful congratulations which were as cheerfully received, and if anything had been required to convince him that good pity would be wasted upon Miss Violet, that want would have been supplied by the young lady's demeanour, which breathed a contentment so complete as to border upon jubilation. Then and for many subsequent days Violet's high spirits rendered her at once the best of company and the most unapproachable of companions. She was gay and charming with the delighted Bob (though adroit in evading occasions of being left alone with him), pleasantly loquacious with Hubert, amiable with everybody. Even Mabel was baffled, and sometimes wondered whether her cousin had either a heart or a soul. However, she was in no doubt as to Hubert's possession of the former organ or as to its lacerated condition. She thought the boy was behaving wonderfully well—as indeed he was; she blamed herself a little for having, with the best intentions, acted in some sort as Violet's accomplice; she divined the anger and mortification which he was at such pains to hide, and longed to make some amends to him. But it was not very easy to see how that could be done.

In some degree it was accomplished by means of a

tacit and tactful sympathy which Hubert was quick to appreciate. In those days he conceived a great and grateful affection for Mabel Penrose, he learned to look forward to his frequent meetings with her as to an unfailing anodyne, and soon understood all the kind consoling things which she knew better than to say. Small wonder was it that his brother, seeing these two constantly together, and noting their mutual comprehension, smiled the superior smile of the intelligent.

“Rot!” retorted Hubert one day, in acknowledgment of some fraternal banter which struck him as anything but intelligent; but of course that artless disclaimer was accepted for what it appeared to be worth.

Had it not been for a series of trivial accidents which led him thither, Cyril would have given Man-nington a wide berth at this time. There is nothing

Adela persisted in calling him faithless, persisted in deploring his perversity.

"I almost despair of ever finding a mate for you," she sighed; "you're so exacting. I begin to see that your wife must be exempt from any opinions or convictions of her own."

"Not if she will allow me to keep mine."

"How can she, poor thing, if she has the affection for you that you'll insist upon?"

"You are good enough to say that you have some affection for me; yet you don't object to my beliefs and disbeliefs."

"Ah, but I'm rare! You don't know how rare I am."

He knew, at any rate, that she was the most equable, tolerant woman he had ever met, and it may be that circumstances just then moved him towards a somewhat exaggerated appreciation of those two qualities. The best women, he thought, are rather apt to be intolerant. Very likely Lady Constantia, with her fierce aversion to her daughter-in-law, and Mabel Penrose, with her orthodox conventionality, were Adela's moral superiors, but as neither of them could make the sort of appeal to him that she could, he disregarded the warnings of the one and tried hard to forget how pretty the other was.

"If I were struggling in the water a quarter of a mile from land, what would you do?" Adela inquired of him one evening.

"Pull you out, I suppose," he answered.

"Well, but could you? I ask because I am not in the least tired of life yet, and because I am sure neither

Bob Luscombe nor your brother would bestow a thought upon me if we were swamped."

"Are you thinking of going out in a boat with them then?"

She nodded. "So are you. I had a note just now from Mabel, who wants us to accompany them down the river to-morrow on the ebb tide."

"In what kind of a boat?"

"In what she calls a tub. Dangerously frail, no doubt, but said to be safe by comparison with the outrigger in which Bob and your brother propose to scull. Now the question is, are you a really strong swimmer?"

"No; but I think I might undertake to save one lady if she didn't throttle me. How about the others, though? It sounds as if I was to be placed in sole charge of three."

"The scullers must look after them. I don't enter

or his three companions would enjoy the projected excursion, which indeed did not seem to have been very happily conceived.

It had, as a matter of fact, been conceived by Violet—ever fertile in expedients for ridding herself of the proximity of her betrothed. Having heard that the two young men sometimes went out for spins in the racing boat which Bob kept on the river a short distance higher up than Kingsmoreton, nothing would satisfy her but to witness one of their performances, and when she was told that Bob also owned a roomy gig, the remainder of the programme settled itself. So, at least, she said; but in truth it was she who settled everything at that time, her lover counting it a joy to yield to her, even when her behests were not wholly to his liking. On this occasion, for the rest, he had a mental reservation, which he did not divulge until Hubert and he had lowered themselves into the outrigger, which an attendant boatman was holding alongside of the raft for them.

“Now, Vi,” he announced, “you’re going to get in and steer for us.”

“You think so, do you?” she returned. “That’s where you make a little mistake.”

“Oh, come on!” Bob urged. “It’s all right—ever so much jollier than waddling along in that old barge. You’ll have to sit still, that’s all, and keep her under the land.”

Now Violet, who was not without experience of boating on the Thames, was quite capable of taking the lines, and perhaps the exhilarating prospect of being sculled down stream by a pair of

athletes may have attracted her, for she seemed to vacillate.

"Well, not if you stroke, anyhow," she said at length, after further entreaties from Bob. "You would draw off my attention all the time, and we should run into something as sure as fate."

The accommodating Bob disembarked instantly. "Right you are! I'll go to bow."

"No; I can't have you in the boat at all; yours is such a distracting personality. Mr. Cyril Hadlow must take your place."

Mr. Cyril Hadlow, who had just driven up to the landing-stage with Adela, declined this privilege very decisively as soon as it was offered to him. He had never done any double sculling or sat on a sliding seat in his life, he said. "Besides which," he added, with a glance at Bob's zephyr and shorts, "I'm not dressed for the part."

Mechanically he obeyed orders; the boat shot out into the stream, and Violet looking triumphantly over her shoulder shouted, "Now we're off! Catch us if you can!"

Had the whole thing been premeditated? No doubt that question presented itself to each of the deserted ones on the raft; but of course they did not put it into words, and Mabel, who was scanning Bob's astonished countenance with some apprehension, had the relief of seeing it slowly overspread by a broad grin. In Bob's eyes his affianced bride could no longer do wrong. He contemplated her pranks with the amused indulgence which some parents display towards their ill-behaved offspring, and had the air of inviting all and sundry to join him in treating them as an excellent joke.

"Serves me right for letting her give me the slip!" he remarked. "Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and you ladies will move along a bit faster now than you'd have done without me, that's one thing."

The gig, propelled by his powerful strokes, which Cyril, taking the bow oar, did his best to imitate, was soon clearing the water at a very respectable rate of speed; but to overtake the fugitives, who maintained an easy lead, was out of the question, nor in any case could a transhipment have been effected without risks which Adela, for one, did not mean to incur.

"Mr. Luscombe," said she, "you are the victim of a heartless outrage, and you have my full leave to inflict any sort of punishment you like upon that

youth the moment you get him on dry land again; but as long as I remain afloat, with only a thin plank between me and the world to come, there must be no larks, please."

Bob assured her that she had nothing to fear. "They can't get further than Chapel Point," said he. "Then we'll head 'em off and see how they like being hustled back up stream."

The promontory to which he alluded formed the western horn of the landlocked estuary on which Kingsmoreton stands. Beyond it was the open sea, unruffled now beneath a cloudless sky, but scarcely fitted at any time for such fragile craft as a river-built pair-oar.

"Just over two miles from the raft," Bob remarked. "We shall be there in ten minutes, with the tide running like this. Take her across under the shore, Miss Penrose; you'll find her steer easier that way."

have any serious consequences; but why must she needs look so? Why suggest jealous suspicions, for which she must be well aware that there was no ground, to a lover who obviously entertained none? Was it not rather stupid of her to sit silent there, with compressed lips and a frowning brow, and gaze after the rapidly vanishing outrigger? Adela, wiser and more considerate, was exerting herself to do the one thing that could be done by keeping a man of uncertain temper amused.

He would not have been so unjust, had he known that Mabel saw a danger which she was powerless to avert, of which Adela was completely ignorant and of which Bob had not taken note. The latter, however, became suddenly alive to it when he looked over his shoulder and, shading his eyes with his hand, caught sight of sculls dipping in a dazzle of sunlit water far ahead.

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed excitedly, “what an idiot that chap is! He may just manage it yet, though. No, he won’t! Ah, I thought as much—there they go!” He brought his open hand down upon his knee with a resounding slap. “Well, they’ve done for themselves this journey and no mistake!”

“What have they done?” asked Adela, in alarm. “You don’t mean that they have had an upset!”

“No; but they’ve got right into the tideway and got swept round the point. Oh, they’re safe enough; they’ll find themselves in smooth water at once, and there’s a cove the other side where they can lie quite snug. But the mischief is that they can’t get back.

I defy any man on earth to pull a boat round Chapel Point against tide and stream; so there they must stay for the next three hours."

"Mightn't they land?" Adela asked.

"What, leave the boat on the beach and walk across to us? Yes, they might do that; only they would have to tramp a longish way round. The cliffs on the sea side are pretty nearly perpendicular, you see."

"They aren't at all likely to attempt it," said Mabel rather drily.

Bob agreed that they were not, adding that he could see nothing for it but to follow them and share their compulsory detention. "When all's said and done, we might as well be there as anywhere else, and it will be rather jolly sculling back in the cool of the evening. The tide turns a little before eight o'clock, I think."

should cross the estuary to Kingsmoreton, whence Adela and Cyril might return home on foot, and, after some further parley, this solution was adopted. The transit was not rapid, as a circuitous course had to be shaped in order to avoid the full strength of the outflowing current; but once more Adela won Cyril's admiration by the vivacity with which she beguiled the way, while once more he felt irritated against Mabel, who scarcely opened her lips and took no pains to conceal the fact that she was troubled and depressed.

"Don't you think," he asked his companion, after she and he had been landed at the harbour steps and were ascending the steep, narrow streets of Kingsmoreton, "that Miss Penrose is rather unnecessarily alarmed? I don't suppose her cousin contemplates an elopement, and I am sure Hubert doesn't."

"Oh, nobody elopes nowadays," answered Adela; "that's a very out-of-date proceeding. Poaching flourishes, though, and if I were Bob Luscombe, I don't know that I should be inclined to trust Violet Ord much farther than I could see her. Perhaps Mabel thinks that your brother also is safer under her eye than out of sight."

"Then all I can say is her eyes must serve her to very little purpose when she has him under observation."

"Love is blind," remarked Adela sententiously.

"So you admit at last that they are in love with one another?"

"I'll make any admission you please if you will only stop looking so cross. You give me a sort of

feeling as if I were to blame for your disappointment or disenchantment or whatever it is. Yet goodness knows I used my best endeavours to bring you and Mabel together."

"I know you did," Cyril owned, with prompt compunction, "and if I had any quarrel with you, it would only be on account of your obstinate refusal to believe that I am neither disappointed nor disenchanted. But nothing, you may be sure, will provoke me into quarrelling with my best friend."

Adela brought a smiling, whimsical side-glance to bear upon him. "Do you know," said she, "I really believe I *am* about the best friend you have."

"I haven't a doubt of it," he answered.

After this they mounted the hill in almost uninterrupted silence. It was not until they had left the town behind them and had entered a deep, shady lane that Cyril recurred to a dropped subject by

allowed to them at the moment. Did she not always speak lightly? It was a matter of temperament with her; she was no more given to sentimentality than he was; and it pleased her to talk as though she was a shallow and selfish woman. But her actions were not selfish. Dutiful and affectionate with Sir Martin, who was not fond of her; invincibly patient with Lady Constantia, who detested her; good-humoured with all the world, and ever on the look-out to render small services to those who generally omitted to thank her for them—surely the real Adela was a very different person from the superficial Adela, whose popularity was of a purely social nature, and whom her mother-in-law had so unfairly charged with duplicity.

But did all this constitute a sufficient reason for asking her to be his wife? Well, it may at least be asserted with truth that many a man has made surrender of his liberty for worse ones. Moreover, there was another reason; the reason which she had given him; a reason which, owing to causes which he did not investigate, struck him as peculiarly cogent just then.

It was all over within the space of a few seconds. Somehow there did not seem to be anything either for him or for her to explain; it was as if they had known all along what must be the outcome of a friendship which had only gone by that designation for want of a more accurate one. A quarter of an hour later Cyril, sauntering along the shrubberies towards Kingsmoreton Court, with his *fiancée's* hand tucked under his arm, proclaimed himself perfectly

"My dear," answered Adela,
"us alive!"

CHAPTER XVI

VAIN AVOWALS

"I DON'T want to brag," said Violet modestly, after Hubert had sculled some three hundred yards down the river in silence, "but I think I worked that rather well, don't you?"

She got no commendation from the partner of her flight, who was in some doubt as to what object she had had in view, and consequently could not pronounce upon the skill displayed in its execution.

"What do you want me to do now, please?" he asked, in a tone which seemed to imply that, although he was ready to obey orders, he did not mistake those which he had already received for a personal compliment.

"Oh, just paddle along to wherever you and Bob meant to go. Don't let the others catch us up, that's all."

She leant back, opened a sunshade, and said, "Now let's enjoy ourselves."

Little prospect of enjoying himself could Hubert discern, and little gratitude did he feel to Miss Ord for having placed him in an equivocal position. She had made a fool of him to her heart's content and

to his heart's grievous hurt: was not that enough for her? If she expected through this freak to derive further amusement from the complaints of a lovelorn dupe, she should be disappointed. He had neither complaints to make nor curiosity to be allayed; nothing was more easy of explanation than her conduct in accepting Bob Luscombe's hand, and nothing concerned him less. He had not shown, and did not intend to show, that he despised her for it; but neither did he mean to be enticed into any repetition of the half-avowals which he would have done better to repress in an earlier stage of their acquaintanceship.

It followed from this highly correct attitude on his part that there was not a great deal to talk about while the boat glided rapidly on her course towards the river's mouth; but Violet did not seem to be at all damped by the grim and prim replies

years, though that, as far as he knew, was not likely to entail great wealth; that he would certainly hate the life, but that beggars cannot be choosers; that of course he would not be able to afford either hunting or shooting, and that if he were granted a week's vacation at Christmas and a month in the summer, he supposed he would be lucky.

The girl under the sunshade (alas! how girlish, how irresponsible and pardonable she looked, as she reclined there, with the rudder-lines slipping through her careless fingers!) sighed and observed pensively that it didn't sound all roses. "But they're bound to let you go for a month or two in summer," she added, in a more cheerful tone, "and then you must come down here and stay with us."

"Thank you very much," answered Hubert, who thought she might have spared him that stab.

Stay with Mr. and Mrs. Bob Luscombe! The bare suggestion sent a shiver all through him. What is the use of pretending to despise, or even truly despising, a person whom you love with your whole heart and soul? It makes no difference; nothing makes any difference, unless, perhaps, long efflux of time, and naturally the lad did not wish to think that that would make a difference either. The desultory conversation was kept up, though without much assistance from him; he began to find self-control harder; every now and then he was assailed by a wild impulse to exclaim, "Oh, drop it! You know I worship you; you know I long for nothing so much as to get away from you! If you are satisfied with your bargain, then it's all right; but why talk as if

we could ever be friends again? Why affect to think that I have forgotten all that I have heard from your own lips?"

No wonder this inward tumult prevented him from noticing a tiny external tumult, in the form of hurrying wavelets, to which he should have been paying attention. It was Violet who revealed his heedlessness to him by blandly inquiring:

"Are we bound for Cherbourg? Because we shall be at sea in about a minute."

There was no question as to that, nor was there any time to be lost. Indeed, it soon became apparent that the time already lost could not be redeemed. With a few powerful strokes Hubert brought the boat's head round; but the only result was that the current, catching her broadside, carried her the more quickly into the miniature race off Chapel Point, and once in that broken water nothing re-

would be unable to accomplish before the turn of the tide. At first she treated the situation as a huge joke; but the further announcement that they had cut themselves off from their friends for a matter of three hours sobered her considerably. This was a good deal more than she had bargained for. The corners of her mouth drooped piteously, her eyes grew large and round, and Hubert's protestations that there was no sort of danger failed to comfort her.

"That depends upon what you call danger," she somewhat fretfully returned. "Of course we are not going to be drowned, but I don't know that I shall not be made to wish I had been." Then, on a sudden, with the face and gesture of a naughty child: "Sometimes I'm afraid of him!" she whispered.

The appeal went straight to a heart which had been vainly endeavouring to harden itself. No doubt the poor girl was afraid of her coarse, choleric lover; no doubt she had also been afraid of other people and things, and had yielded to a combination too formidable to be defied. If only it had been possible to throw protecting arms round her and soothe her with promises that nobody should ever frighten her again! But that being out of the question, Hubert did what he could by accepting sole responsibility for the mishap which had occurred and professing rather more confidence than he felt in his friend's reasonableness. He added that their movements, which must have been observed from the boat astern, had probably occasioned no surprise.

"Luscombe and I had a narrow squeak of being caught in the same way yesterday; it's the sort of thing that might happen to anybody who wasn't keeping a sharp look-out, and the only misfortune is that they can't follow us without shutting the door behind them, just as we have done. But I'll tell you what I'll do if you like; we'll run the boat ashore, and then I'll scramble up over the cliffs somehow or other and report that you're all right."

"I don't quite see how you will mend matters by leaving me all alone," objected Violet, and he did not like to point out that the fact of her having been left all alone might be regarded as an extenuating circumstance.

Whether at a pinch he could have contrived to scale those precipitous, treacherous red cliffs or not seemed to him doubtful when he surveyed them at

there are the ruins of the chapel," he suggested, pointing to some sparse fragments of masonry whence the headland derived its name; "we might stroll up and have a look at them."

Antiquarians still take a certain interest in those remains of a place of worship which is said to date from the earliest introduction of Christianity into these Islands; but after many centuries of disintegration and the systematic pilferings of such dwellers in the vicinity as have chanced from time to time to be in need of a good block of granite, they have been reduced to proportions so scanty that they are no longer deemed worthy of mention in local handbooks, and have few visitors except sea-birds, who find them convenient for domestic purposes in the nesting season. To Hubert and Violet an angle of the crumbling western wall afforded shade from the slant rays of a burning sun, and by this they profited, she seating herself on a flat stone and he stretching his long legs out on the coarse herbage at her feet.

"I wonder," Violet said, after several attempts to keep a languishing conversation alive had perished of inanition, "whether I am suspected of having got carried away like this on purpose?"

"Of course not," Hubert answered. "Why should you?"

"Why should I be suspected, do you mean, or why should I have done it? Well, I didn't do it purposely; but one doesn't expect charitable judgments and one certainly doesn't get them. Not that it matters."

"Really I don't think it does," said Hubert,

wishing to relieve her of anxiety. "Even if Luscombe didn't see for himself that I was the only person to blame, he won't doubt my word when I tell him so."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of Bob!" was Violet's unforeseen and slightly impatient rejoinder.

She did not, however, state whose lack of charity she had had in mind, and Hubert forbore to question her. Did she want him to acknowledge that he had judged her harshly with reference to another affair? If that was what she was driving at, he could give her no help; the less said about it the better. He therefore said nothing at all, but pulled up tufts of grass and scattered them broadcast until, after an interval of a minute or two, she resumed:

"I suppose you know that I am to be married next month."

Hubert started and looked up quickly. "No; I

"No, you are not glad; you are sorry. You would like me to be miserable and remorseful. You don't realise—or rather you don't choose to admit—that I had no choice."

Hubert was not much inclined to take up the challenge. "I haven't the impertinence to set myself up as a critic of your actions," he answered slowly, after uprooting more grass. "Of course I understand that it was a strong temptation."

"It wasn't a temptation; it was a necessity. A man who is hard up may be strongly tempted to marry an heiress; but he isn't obliged to do it; he can work for his living. There's absolutely only one way in which a semi-educated woman can escape from eating the bread of charity."

Hubert heaved a long sigh. "Yes, I know; I haven't forgotten what you told me. I daresay it's true that in one sense you had no choice. But—Luscombe!"

"Well, you rather like him, don't you? He is what you call 'not half a bad chap.'"

"It isn't a question of whether I like him or not. But what is the good of talking about it?"

"We must talk about something for the next two hours and a half, and most likely we shall never talk about anything together again, as you mean to turn a deaf ear to all invitations to stay at Stawell."

"I didn't say that."

"You couldn't have said it more distinctly. Why are you so vindictive?"

The young man raised himself into a more erect posture, clasped his hands round his knees and looked

his tormentor full in the face. "I don't think I am vindictive," he answered, "but I don't think you can really need to be told why I am not going to return to Stawell as your guest."

Her eyes met his deprecatingly. "Was it my fault?" she murmured.

"I don't know—perhaps not. I suppose I should have loved you anyhow."

"I saw that you cared a little," she owned, "but——"

"I care so much that I hope to God I shall never set eyes on you again after your wedding day!" he interrupted vehemently.

She began to weep noiselessly, as those weep who have no hope. "But I thought," she went on, completing her unfinished sentence, "the best thing I could do for you was to disgust you. I didn't think you cared as much as—as I did."

die! Just now—just during this evanescent flash of experience—she was as happy as Hubert was, if not as crazy, and who can be hard-hearted enough to grudge the poor girl so niggardly a share of life's good gifts?

Such as her happiness was, it did not last long. She herself had to murder it when Hubert compelled her to tell him that he was talking like a madman. The rupture with Bob Luscombe which he so naively assumed to be a matter of course; the long years of waiting until he should be in a position to offer her some humble suburban home, combined with the bare means of subsistence; the sweet, but ludicrous delusion that he and she could have a future of any description in common—all these visions had to be swept out of the domain of actualities, and without many words that imperative duty was accomplished.

He did not make it easy for her. He could not, or would not, believe that she was at once sincere in her love for him and inexorable in her determination to sever her life from his.

"You love me!" he cried, in a sort of angry triumph; "you have told me so, and all the rest follows. It wouldn't be possible for you to marry Luscombe now, even if you were fond of him, instead of hating him and being—as you confess you are—afraid of him."

"It is possible," she meekly persisted, "and I am going to do it. Nothing follows from my loving you and telling you so, except that we must not meet any more; everything else remains just as it was."

To her the proposition was self-evident; to him it

appeared flatly self-contradictory. How could she help recognising that their mutual avowal had made all the difference in the world! His love and anger and bewilderment drew from him some bitter speeches which she took uncomplainingly. No love, no wrath, no eloquence could do away with the two relentless facts that she must marry and that the man whom she would fain have chosen was debarred by penury from marrying her. Only when at length he threatened to confess all to Bob Luscombe, unless she did, she gently reminded him that that would be going too far.

"You can't give me away," she said, employing the phraseology which came most naturally to them both; "it wouldn't be playing the game."

He made a gesture of despairing acquiescence, but retorted by asking her whether she thought it was playing the game to marry one man while she loved another.

pany and who, after waved handkerchiefs had signalled him up from the beach, had only good-humoured rebukes to pronounce.

"Well, you're a nice couple of duffers! Teach you to look where you're going another time—what? I thought I'd better follow you, but I put Miss Penrose ashore, as she was afraid the old man might be wondering what had become of her and getting into a stew. We landed the others at Kingsmoreton first. Now what excuse have you got to make for yourselves, eh?"

Violet, with much presence of mind and with every trace of emotion banished from her face, carried the war into the enemy's country by returning:

"It was all your fault! Why didn't you give us a yell when you saw what was going to happen?"

Bob laughed boisterously. "My fault, was it? I like that! I suppose you'll say it was my fault that I got left behind on the raft next."

"So it was," Violet coolly declared. "As you chose to get out and as Mr. Cyril Hadlow didn't choose to get in, we had to fend for ourselves."

An amicable wrangle ensued, in the course of which Hubert strolled away and, seating himself on a rock by the water's edge, pondered the problem of the eternal feminine with somewhat less detachment than the subject demands. He had ample time to devote to it before the tide began to flow, and perhaps Bob appreciated his tact in absenting himself. Violet certainly did.

CHAPTER XVII

ADELA IN EXCELSIS

MR. PICKERING and his curate Mr. Sandford, who had been asked to dine at the Court that evening, arrived a little before their time, which enabled the former to comply the more readily with a request, conveyed to him while he was removing his overcoat, that he would "see her ladyship for a minute upstairs." Periodical problems, relating to domestic or parochial matters, arose with which Lady Constantia did not wish her husband to be troubled,

Constantia answered, with some bitterness; "Adela probably came to a decision the moment she knew that his position here was secure. There is nothing to be done with Adela; but you have influence with him. Can't you persuade him to break it off?"

"I hardly see on what ground I could do that. One must presume that he is attached to her."

Lady Constantia shook her head. "I see and hear so little that I can't speak from personal observation, but I presumed from what you all told me that he was attached to Mabel Penrose. Adela may have made mischief between them; that wouldn't be unlike her. Anyhow, she has been spreading her net quite openly of late, and about an hour ago she and he came in with the cool announcement that they were engaged."

"What did Sir Martin say?"

"Not much—to them. He confessed to me that he was very sorry about it—and of course surprised."

"I make the same confession," said the Rector, "if there is any use in that. Your sorrow, I gather, exceeds your surprise."

"Adela exhausted her power of surprising me long ago," answered Lady Constantia drily; "but she can bring additional sorrow upon me, and if this shameless marriage takes place, she will."

"Are we justified in describing it as shameless?"

"If you prefer to call it shameful, I have no objection. Not that I object to it on account of Adela's effrontery alone, or because one can't help pitying her silly victim. What I foresee is that if

they become man and wife, Martin will certainly want them to live a good many months out of the year in this house; and you know what that would entail. Even as it is, I am obliged to resort to all manner of stratagems to keep him from inviting people to stay, and with a newly married couple under our roof, what chance should I have?"

The Rector pinched his lower lip between his finger and thumb reflectively. "Yes, there's that risk. It would have been reduced to a minimum by Cyril's marrying Mabel Penrose."

"Exactly so."

"But human nature is perverse, and it's a waste of time to lament over what might have been. Now what do you expect me to say to Cyril?"

"You might tell him what Adela is."

"One difficulty is that I don't know. Besides which, he is too good a fellow to listen to back-

"I fear not. A distinct promise has been given, and Martin does not break his promises."

She spoke with a sort of regretful pride; for although she sometimes thought her husband quixotic, she would not have him other than what he was.

"Well," said the Rector, "I accept a watching brief; I can do no more. I fancy this match as little as you do; but one thing you may depend upon: unless Mrs. Spencer herself can be induced to break it off, nobody else will. Isn't it time for us to go downstairs?"

It speaks well for the self-command and good manners of the persons chiefly concerned that dinner passed off without the least visible discomfort and without any allusion, open or veiled, to the subject which was in all their minds. Lady Constantia, it is true, atoned for the unwonted garrulity just recorded by remaining all but mute from start to finish; but Sir Martin chatted good-humouredly to Cyril, whose account of the afternoon's aquatic adventures seemed to divert him; the Rector joined in with reminiscences of bygone exploits on the Isis, and Adela amused herself by discussing recent social scandals in an undertone with the curate, appearing to take it for granted that he must be conversant with all their details. Mr. Sandford, who had never so much as heard the names of the culprits implicated therein, was a good deal horrified, half incredulous, perhaps also unconsciously flattered at being treated as one of the initiated. To him Mrs. Spencer Hadlow stood for the world, the flesh

and the devil; but he would have conceded that these had an engaging representative in her.

"We must always be on our guard lest fellow-feeling for the sinner should lead us into condoning the sin," Cyril heard him say. In reply to which strikingly novel admonition Adela, without moving a muscle, drawled out: "Ah, that's so subtle! One sees how you would combine sympathy with severity if you were one's confessor. Is it really our duty, do you think, to confess our sins to a priest?"

Not, perhaps, a duty of universal obligation; yet an inestimable privilege which we can only neglect at our soul's peril. Such, Cyril gathered, was the view of Mr. Sandford, who waxed eager and eloquent upon the point. Out of what unpromising material Adela could always extract sport for herself!—and with what easy dexterity she fitted her conversation

"Now I want to smoke a cigarette; but I won't spoil the bouquet of your claret by lighting it in here, Pickering, and I'll be back before you are ready for coffee. Come and take a turn on the terrace with me, Cyril, if you have had enough wine."

Out in the warm night, under a starlit sky, the old man took the young one by the arm and began, without any preface: "I must ask you a question which you won't like. Is this your doing or hers?"

"Well, I suppose we are jointly responsible," answered Cyril, laughing a little. "Isn't it usually so in these cases?"

"My dear fellow, we are discussing your particular case, which is unusual in more ways than one. I haven't, to start with, the right of veto which I might claim if you were my son, as well as my heir——"

"Oh, but I think you have," broke in Cyril. "What would you do if you wanted to prevent a son of my age from making a marriage of which you disapproved? Tell him that he must either give way or be cut off with a shilling?"

"Well, I might—in the last resort."

"All the more easily, then, can you bring the same pressure to bear upon me, a mere collateral. You don't like the idea of my marrying your daughter in-law, do you?"

"No; since you ask me, I don't. Nor does my wife."

"Oh, I knew Lady Constantia wouldn't like it."

"So you see—or don't you see?—why I asked you a rather impertinent question. I must be satisfied

that you know what you are doing. Unless you proposed, as many a man has done before now, in a fit of pique because you had been slighted, or had imagined yourself slighted, by some other lady——”

Cyril made a vigorous gesture of denial.

“Unless you did that, it stands to reason, I am afraid, that you are sincere. You have nothing to gain by marrying a widow who is considerably your senior and who has no private fortune. Adela, on the other hand, has obvious inducements to marry you.”

“I understand what you mean; but you are mistaken. She is absolutely disinterested; I am certain of that.”

Sir Martin was as certain as it is possible to be with regard to any feminine actions or motives that she was not; but he wisely refused himself the luxury of proclaiming his conviction. All he said was:

mistaken. I can't insist farther. Let us go back to the dining-room and say no more about it."

Cyril would have liked to say a little more about it. He would have liked, for instance, to ask what Adela had done to deserve the animosity of a kind-hearted and liberal father-in-law; but perhaps, after all, it was best to leave well alone, and he was conscious of having been very leniently dealt with. He could only hope that his betrothed had fared half as well at the hands of the redoubtable Lady Constantia.

Not until an hour and a half later could he make inquiry as to that. He was called upon presently to take a hand at whist with Lady Constantia for partner, Sir Martin and the Rector making up the rubber, while Adela and the curate talked theology in the background. As usual, he made several glaring blunders, and as usual, after the rubber had been lost, his apologies were received with a silence more crushing than any spoken rebuke. Rather crushing also was Mr. Pickering's pointed abstention from the felicitations which Cyril gave him an opportunity to offer by following him out into the hall, helping him on with his overcoat and saying: "I suppose you have heard my news?"

"Oh yes, I have heard," the Rector briskly replied. "I always thought Mrs. Spencer was the sort of person who would be likely to marry again. What a lovely night! Now, Sandford, are you ready?"

Cyril ran upstairs, laughing under his breath, but a little mortified nevertheless, and was soon joined in his studio, as he had expected to be, by Adela, who

perched herself upon the arm of his chair, drew a long breath, and exclaimed :

“ Well, thank goodness, *that's* over and done with ! ”

“ Was her ladyship very terrible ? ” Cyril asked.

“ Terrible was no word for her ! She didn't call me an abandoned minx, but of course she gave me to understand that I was that and worse. Well, I bear no malice. ”

“ I don't think you ever do, ” said Cyril admiringly.

“ Can't afford it, dear boy, at my time of life ; nothing is so wrinkling. I needn't tell you that I was reminded of my time of life more than once in the course of a trenchant monologue. ”

“ You allowed it to be a monologue, did you ? ”

Adela shrugged her shoulders. “ What could I say for myself ? Naturally, it is gall and wormwood to her poor old creature to find me for the second

in-law, and he'll fancy me even less, I daresay, as your wife; but he is always a gentleman."

"Yes, but for that very reason one hates to take advantage of his scrupulous good faith."

"Oh, you're another!" laughed Adela. "It's because you're another, and because he knows it, that you may perpetrate all manner of eccentricities with impunity. At the same time, if you feel that you owe him something, you won't be more eccentric than you can help. Let's make good resolutions, shall we? I've begun already, though I don't suppose you have noticed it."

"Noticed what?" Cyril asked.

She dived into his pocket for his cigarette-case, took out a cigarette, which she held up, and then put it back. "Never again!" said she; "you don't like to see women smoking."

"Oh, but indeed——"

"Oh, but indeed you don't! And if I have any other small vices which you wish me to abandon, strike now while the iron is hot and say so."

He was a good deal touched. He answered as lovers answer; he could not doubt that Adela loved him, and before they parted he was able to assure his conscience that he loved her. He even went so far as to quiet that inward marplot with the perfectly absurd assertion that there are more ways than one of being in love.

His younger brother, who did not pretend to his wisdom or experience, could have told him that there is only one, but might have added that women contrive to reconcile it with conduct which would be

CYRIL, who asked him point-blank
“but one can't stay with a man for
I haven't too much time left if I
of mother and the girls before I s
labour. So I'm off to the Isle of V

As it had been arranged that l
home in London with his family, tl
lame excuse; but Cyril, divining t
the previous afternoon had broug
misunderstanding with Mabel wh
pected to right itself if left alone, v
to put no further questions. The c
he had to make respecting his own
with an outburst of facetious applat

“Didn't I say so!” cried Hubert
through you all along! Everybo
swore you were after Miss Penrose
knew rather better.”

“I daresay you did,” observed Cy

“And I'll tell you what it is,
you're doing a jolly sensible thing

Mrs. Spencer may have been of the same opinion. She soon joined the brothers, accepted the compliments of the younger with the remark that it would be her endeavour to show herself worthy of them, and professed much regret at the tidings of his abrupt departure. If she could form a shrewd guess at its cause, she kept her surmises to herself. Not even to Cyril—least of all, perhaps, to Cyril—was she disposed to impart them after luncheon was over and Hubert, who had been persuaded to stay for that meal, had left.

“I suppose,” Cyril remarked, “there has been a tiff between him and Miss Penrose about something. It seems rather a pity.”

To which Adela sententiously replied: “One never knows what is a pity and what isn’t; the simplest plan is to take things as they come, and remember that it will be all the same a few years hence. At this very moment, unless I am much mistaken, my beloved mother-in-law is calling Heaven to witness what a pity it is that your brother didn’t come into the world before you.”

“There,” observed Cyril, “I heartily concur.”

“I’m sure you do! But why do you imagine that she treated him with such marked favour at luncheon and put on that tenderly regretful air when she bade him good-bye?”

“Because she likes him, I suppose; because he is a pleasant, cheery mortal, with no tiresome fads, and with the tastes that a country gentleman ought to have. In short, because he is a perfect fit, whereas I am a most palpable misfit.”

of the other way about?"

Cyril shook his head. "I am
tion wouldn't make much differenc
moreton be cut and stitched to my

"Ah, that's where I come in!
how useful I am going to be to yo
made to realise that a man of your
credit and an ornament to the nei
may have to respect and adopt
haven't quite decided yet. Anyh
to be a success; it is I who promise

"You don't even draw the line
Cyril, laughing.

"I draw no lines where you a
intrepid little woman declared.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LESSON AND A MISHAP

WHEN Hubert, who had sculled the outrigger up the river, leaving the gig to the engaged couple, took off his cap to Violet on the landing-stage and marched away in the twilight, she knew full well that she would see his face no more. He could not, of course, remain at Stawell after what had taken place, nor was he likely to desire any more than she did that they should go through the tragic farce of a formal leave-taking. Nevertheless, it would be obviously difficult for him to retreat within twenty-four hours; so, to make assurance doubly sure, she decided on taking Mabel to Exeter with her by train the next morning, alleging that she had shopping to do which admitted of no delay. This expedition occupied the whole day, and whether Violet was glad or sorry to hear that Mr. Hubert Hadlow had not called during her absence Mabel, with an interrogative eye upon her, could not tell. On the morrow Bob rode over alone, bearing a message of apology and regret from his friend, who by that time was already far away.

“Can’t say, I’m sure,” he answered, with a somewhat chagrined air, when Mabel inquired the reason for so sudden a desertion; “had enough of us, I

suppose. Well, as I told him, I don't want to keep any man in my house against his will, and if he thinks there's more fun to be had in the Isle of Wight than here, that's all right. We shall have him back for the wedding, anyhow, I hope. Oh, and talking of weddings, have you heard what's up at Kingsmoreton Court?"

"Never!" ejaculated Violet, without waiting for a more explicit statement. "Oh, poor fellow! But *how* weak of him!"

Bob looked puzzled. "Eh?—poor fellow? Devilish lucky fellow, I call him! What's the matter with Mrs. Spencer?"

"Nothing that you would ever find out, my dear Bob. Her husband may when the bills begin to drop in; but that won't be yet awhile. What would you do, I wonder, if you were to discover during our honeymoon that I was in debt to the tune of several

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diversion had been thoughtfully created for the purpose of giving the third person time to recover her countenance.

Mabel, however, required no assistance for the recovery of what she had not lost. She was, it must be owned, a little surprised and a little sorry, for she doubted whether Cyril had chosen wisely; still, she thought Adela fascinating enough to justify any man's choice, and she said so.

"This solves several difficulties, at all events," she composedly remarked, "and it's a stroke of poetical justice. I have always felt that some compensation was Adela's due."

Much less amiable and less dignified were the subsequent comments of Mr. Penrose, who, on being told the news shortly afterwards, became very red and angry.

"Most flagrant case of kidnapping I ever heard of in my life," he shouted. "Why, the woman's almost old enough to have rocked him in his cradle! Hadlow ought to be ashamed of himself for allowing it."

"Do you think Sir Martin was consulted, Uncle Jim?" asked Violet demurely.

"Consulted? Well, seeing that he pays the piper, I suppose he has some right to call the tune, hasn't he? But perhaps he thinks it best to put up with the ills he knows of. There's never any telling where you are with a feather-brained young Radical like that adopted son of his."

Poor Mr. Penrose was not unnaturally incensed against Cyril, whose Radicalism he might have

pardoned, but whose inconstancy he could not. To have been ready (as in truth he had been) to accept that not wholly desirable young man as a son-in-law; to have discerned, as he thought he had, every sign that his formal consent would be requested ere long; to have overlooked certain patent disqualifications; to have rejected in advance all other eligible candidates in the county—and then to be coolly left in the lurch like this! What father of an incomparable and well-dowered daughter would not have been furious? No doubt they were well rid of the fellow; but that did not diminish or extenuate his impudence. Worst of all, there lurked at the back of the old gentleman's mind a terrible fear that his dear Mabel's heart had not escaped untouched.

As he was no adept at concealing his thoughts, Mabel understood very well why he continued to

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up to my weight and a bit of a rogue. Hitchens wanted too much money for him."

"He didn't want much from me," said Mr. Penrose, at once forgetting all about Cyril. "I don't mind telling you between ourselves that I got him for sixty sovereigns."

"H'm!—that tells a tale, don't it? Not quite your horse, Mr. Penrose, I'm afraid."

"Well, I daresay I could have made him my horse twenty years ago," returned the old gentleman, somewhat nettled by the implication. "As it is, I may have to get rid of him, unless he mends his manners; but we shall see. He gave my head lad a toss yesterday, and he seems to be as full of tricks as a monkey."

Bob shook his head. "It's that Lottery blood. I don't care for any of Lottery's stock myself; slugs or devils every one of 'em, and sometimes both."

"Not a bit of it!" protested Mr. Penrose eagerly. "I could name at least three that I'd give a couple of hundred apiece for now if they were in the market, and glad to have them at the price. This one seems to be a queer customer; but it isn't his breeding that's wrong, you may depend upon it. I shouldn't wonder if Hitchens had knocked him about too much."

"Hasn't thrashed him enough, more likely," returned the unconvinced Bob. "I know the brutes!"

A protracted controversy ensued, which fulfilled Mabel's purpose in starting it and enabled her to

nor could she help being aw
would be very generally regarded
willow. However, she said all
to say without gross insincerity,
finished her missive Violet came
whether they were going to drive
or not.

"We are if you like," Mabel
Mrs. Luscombe expect us?"

"I believe so. She is in a chro
for my company, it appears. Ratl
sidering that I am going to tur
and home in a few weeks; but,
she looks upon eviction as a posi
the way, Bob is going to ride t
and keep him for a week's school

"He will have his hands full
then."

"I most devoutly hope so. C
stable-yard and see him start."

To see Bob Luscombe out

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heavy hands, but he was never beaten, and few indeed out of his many falls had been those in which his opponent had not participated. When the two girls reached the stable-yard he was standing beside Mr. Penrose, with his hands, which grasped a stout hunting-crop, behind his back and his legs wide apart, while he scrutinised the bay, a handsome, weedy, breedy animal, rather light in the quarters, but otherwise well shaped for speed and to all appearance quiet enough.

"Can he jump?" Bob inquired of the groom who was holding him.

"Well, sir, he *can*," answered the man.

"But he won't, eh?"

"Not without 'ounds is runnin', sir. Come to that, there's quite a number o' things as he won't do."

"Ah, he'll have to learn that there's such a word in the language as 'must,'" observed Bob, getting into the saddle without more ado.

His education was taken in hand forthwith; for it appeared that one of the things which he would not do was to leave the yard. On being asked to walk through the open gates, he first sidled away, then whipped round suddenly, laid back his ears and flung up his heels. Bob gave him one more chance to obey orders before hitting him sharply with the crop; after which the battle began. It lasted some five minutes, during which time the horse employed every expedient known to equine ingenuity in the way of plunging, kicking and bucking to rid himself of his rider; but, failing to accomplish that

purpose, and receiving heavier punishment than he liked in the process, he stood still at last, with heaving flanks, in mute acknowledgment of surrender. It was now the turn of the man, whose blood was up and who had no mind for partial victories. Having with whip and spur roused some sullen renewal of resistance, he tightened his hold of the reins and forced his mount to turn round and round half-a-dozen times in swift succession, showering blows, first on one side of his head then on the other, all the time, until the wretched animal, cowed, bewildered and half stunned, was reduced to abject submission.

"That'll calm you for the present, my boy," observed Bob, with a rather savage grin, as he rode forth under the admiring gaze of a knot of grooms and helpers.

Mr. Penrose had watched the struggle gravely and

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who pretend to be so fond of horses! Uncle Jim was thoroughly ashamed, anyhow, whether you were or not."

Mabel turned a surprised and slightly disdainful face towards the excited girl. "I don't think he was," she answered. "Father doesn't like to see horses treated in that way; nobody does. It could hardly be called cruelty, though, and it was done deliberately, not in a passion."

"That's just it," cried Violet; "that was the odious part of it! If he had been in a rage and had lost his head, I could have understood; but—but——"

"But you evidently don't understand that if animals—or human beings either, for that matter—are to be punished at all, they must be punished in a manner that they won't forget. Very often once is enough."

"I never saw him look quite like that before," Violet went on shudderingly, without heeding the interpolation. "I always knew he was brutal and brutish; but this, somehow, was a revelation. Mabel, it makes me feel afraid——"

Mabel's elbow was thrust against her ribs, while a backward glance from Mabel's eye reminded her of the presence of the groom who sat behind them. She took the hint and said no more until they came to a steep hill, when the man jumped down. Then she laid a trembling hand upon her cousin's wrist and whispered, "Mabel, I don't think I can!—really I don't think I can!"

She looked so small, so scared, so piteous, that it was impossible to help feeling sorry for her. Never-

without any great injustice; danger of his ever beating to be admitted that as a loss self both devoted and patient Mabel could not bring herself of consolation, than—

“Well, it isn't too late.”

“Oh, but I am afraid it a gesture of despair. “That should want! Think of Ida and Bob himself!”

“I am thinking of them “they couldn't do anything. pleasant for you, but when cold and the deep sea, one must suppose.”

“Yes, and you would look just as you looked on while half killed!” exclaimed Violet

“The horse was not half killed be drowned,” Mabel returned

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she had said; for the time being, at all events, she felt much as she presumed that the bay horse had done: "I won't—let them do their worst—I won't!" But perhaps, like the bay, she lacked that innate courage of which obstinacy and defiance are no evidence. As the pleasant summer landscape flitted past her, while the light phaeton rolled swiftly along, she had the sensation of being hurried towards an inexorable doom, from which she longed to be saved rather than resolved to save herself. Almost immediately, as it seemed to her, they were within the confines of the Stawell domain, and after passing the lodge, Mabel pointed with her whip and said:

"Here comes Bob. He must have been doing some cross-country work."

Bob at the same moment caught sight of the ladies, waved his hand to them and put his horse at a fence which divided the park from the grass field across which he was cantering. This was a bank of no great height, with some shrubby growth and a binder running along the top of it and a ditch on the take-off side. As Bob approached he put on the pace, meaning to fly it, which indeed was the only safe thing to do. The bay, however, either because he objected on general principles to "larking" or because he did not fancy the look of the place, refused decisively. A second request met with no better result; but at the third time of asking, which was peremptory and forcible, he hurled himself against the bank, scarcely attempting to rise, and after a vain scramble for foothold, fell backwards, with his rider under him.

...she should be
dramatic fashion?—and would
even at the expense of a few
questions presented themselves
were answered as swiftly as
space of a minute she had
shocked, almost exultant, te

All these emotions were
not dead, though he lay still
he even have been much shaken
Mabel in a loud, clear voice
you!”

That was easily done.
sweating, and bleeding—for
shoulder—stood a few yards
taking hold of his bridle, re
rider.

“Can you get up?” she asked

“No,” answered Bob laced
broke my leg. Fell clear, I
clumsy devil trod on me and
better let 'em know at the

lift the injured man out of the ditch without giving him unnecessary pain was no easy task for rough and unskilled hands, but under such circumstances Bob showed at his very best. That he was suffering acutely his face betrayed, but never a moan nor a complaint escaped his lips, and he gave his directions as coolly as if he had been a mere looker-on at proceedings which must have tortured him. Indeed, he displayed more anxiety about the horse's plight than his own, and refused to be moved until he had satisfied himself by personal inspection that the damage sustained by that rather ungenerous animal was not of a nature to take anything off his value. Finally, he begged the ladies to go on ahead and prepare his mother for the spectacle of an alarming procession.

"Tell her it's all right—no occasion to get agitated. Else we shall have her howling herself off into hysterics most likely."

It was impossible not to admire his pluck, and if he had wished to obliterate the effect produced by his previous behaviour upon Violet's impressionable mind, he could have hit upon no better method of so doing. Mrs. Luscombe, on the other hand, proved a little trying. The good lady, though much upset by the news conveyed to her, did not become hysterical; but, with a sublime and ridiculous self-abnegation, she insisted upon Violet's presence in the bedroom whither the sufferer was transported, and resigned to her the privilege of making such preparations as could be made for the advent of the doctor.

"It is your right to be with him, my dear," said she

before he joined them downstairs. He said that he had made his plans, and that, under the circumstances, he would permit to say that this was going to be a success. There were two fractures above the knee, and quite a deal would be required to set matters right.

"A couple of months!" exclaimed the doctor, aghast; "but then the wedding is off!"

"No doubt about that, I'm a doctor. "We may get him up in a week, but I would rather say eight. As for the months hence should be nearly well! he and Miss Ord are bound to be only bachelors or spinsters once when we're married, it's for life."

Mrs. Luscombe thought that was a little upon impertinence; but to the doctor's expression of a most consolatory tone, she had been able to look very far forward to the marriage.

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end and the millennium begin. It was no longer a woebegone, panic-stricken maiden, but the gayest and most light-hearted of neighbours who sat beside Mabel on the return journey to Mannington, and it is to be feared that poor Bob, who had squeezed her hand and kissed it at parting, placed a very erroneous interpretation upon the bright smile with which she had made response to that caress.

CHAPTER XIX

ABDICATION

ADELA, who had arranged to pay visits in various parts of England during the fag end of the summer, told Cyril that she would cry off these engagements if he liked, but, detecting some reluctance in her tone, he begged her not to do that, and indeed he agreed with her that, under existing conditions, it would be just as well for her to absent herself from the home circle for a time. It cannot be said, however, that the conditions improved in any perceptible way after her departure and for the next few weeks

you have acted very foolishly, and that Adela has acted disgracefully."

The worst of it was that there was no getting away from her. Luncheon Cyril sometimes contrived to shirk, but breakfast and dinner were unavoidable, nor between those meals could much occupation be provided for a perverse representative of the lord of the manor. Sir Martin had to acknowledge that he was perverse. There were matters connected with the management of the estate which might very well have been entrusted to his care, had he in any degree resembled an ordinary heir; but what can you do with a man who invariably takes the tenants' side, whether they are right or wrong, advocates secular education, denounces the game laws, dreams of the ultimate nationalisation of the land, and makes no bones about saying so? That he will come to his senses in time may be highly probable, but meanwhile he can hardly be assisted to go about preaching revolutionary doctrines on the eve of a general election, and it was a disquieting thought to Sir Martin that his own time was not unlikely to be brief.

"Oh, I know I am not dangerously ill," he answered Cyril, with a touch of unusual fretfulness, one day; "but I am liable to become so at any moment, and—after me the deluge, perhaps! Is it really a matter of conscience with you to be a deluge?"

"I think it is a matter of impossibility, sir," replied Cyril, smiling. "I see all sorts of reforms which seem to me to be desirable, but as for carrying them in the face of public opinion, vested interests, and im-

memorial custom, not to mention your wishes, which I should feel bound to respect, I might as well try to control the weather or the tides. As I am absolutely powerless to bite, may I not be allowed the innocent solace of barking?"

Sir Martin drew down the corners of his mouth. "My dear fellow, that is always such bad policy! A dog who barks and doesn't bite annoys his friends without alarming his foes."

Nothing can be more obvious; nor in truth would Cyril have held such language a few months earlier; but just then his nerves were on edge and, for reasons which he did not, or could not, analyse, he was dissatisfied with himself and everybody about him.

"Ah, well!" resumed Sir Martin, after a moment, "I daresay Adela will teach you worldly wisdom."

Adela would doubtless have been pleased (she might not have been surprised, though) if she had known how much she was missed by her future husband. Whether designedly or not, she had abandoned him at the very moment when he stood most in need of her cheerful, philosophical support, and the very fact that his projected marriage was contemplated with such general coldness and disapproval strengthened, rather than weakened, his personal conviction that it would be the saving of him. He was commiserated or thought a fool, he gathered, because people foresaw that he would be managed by his wife; but a managing wife was exactly what he required. His mother alone, though not enthusiastic, had had the wit to perceive that. "I wish Adela were a few years younger," she had written; "still she will have a steadying influence

over you which no young girl could have had, and she won't fall foul of your crotchets, which is a comfort."

Of course it was a comfort, and of course he could have next to nothing in common with a stereotyped English girl, such as Mabel Penrose, for example. Supposing that, by misadventure, she had fallen in love with him, as he had so nearly fallen in love with her, how soon they would both have discovered their mistake? He had scarcely seen her since the announcement of his engagement, upon which she had somewhat formally congratulated him, nor had he received any encouragement to resume his visits to Mannington, once so frequent; but on the afternoon of the above-mentioned talk with Sir Martin he came across her at Stawell, whither he went to inquire for the slowly recovering Bob, and, as she was in the act of leaving the house when he rang the bell, they could not well avoid walking away together. He had an instinctive feeling that she would have preferred to avoid doing so, and this annoyed him a little; for although he might sometimes have rubbed her the wrong way with his Radicalism, he really did not see that he had done anything else to deserve the withdrawal of her old friendliness.

"I hope Sir Martin is better," she began, after they had traversed some little distance without breaking silence.

"I am sure," answered Cyril, "Lady Constantia would tell you that he is as well as can be expected. It is understood, you see, that nobody can expect his health to be quite satisfactory so long as he has such a thorn in his side as I am."

Mabel did not take up the challenge; she only remarked: "He is a good patient, I should think."

"Well, he is good: I am not sure that he is quite as patient as he was. Perhaps that can't be expected either. I try him rather highly at times, as you may imagine. It's true that I myself am rather highly tried."

"Not by him surely!"

"Less by him than by anybody; though even he, I suspect, is beginning to wish that he had never set eyes upon me. There are some apprentices who can't be taught their trade, even when they are willing to learn, and that of course is a trying experience for the master. It may be a little trying for the apprentice also, though."

"Don't you think anybody can learn a trade if he is really willing to be taught?"

"Indeed I don't! Not all the artists in Europe

It is a pity; because I should jump for joy if he would release me, and Hubert would meet every requirement of the case."

"Really," said Mabel, speaking with more animation, "I think he would, and I can't think that your being the elder is an insurmountable obstacle. In so many ways the change would be such a blessing and such a relief! I don't mean," she hastened to add, noticing Cyril's dry smile, "that I should wish you to be deprived of your inheritance if you had any wish to keep it; but you don't want to be Sir Martin's heir——"

"I certainly don't."

"And for some reasons, as you yourself acknowledge, he can't wish you to succeed him. Besides" —she hesitated for a moment—"there are other people involved."

"Oh, several," he agreed.

He did not mention Adela, but specified his mother, who would lose nothing by the substitution of one of her sons for the other, and Lady Constantia, who would accept the change with thankfulness, and the tenants and all the neighbouring nobility, gentry and clergy, all of whom would breathe more freely when they heard that a young man of the right sort was to reign some day in Sir Martin's stead.

"I don't know whether there is anybody else," he concluded with a touch of pardonable malice.

Mabel's colour was always apt to come and go upon slight provocation. If she blushed a little now, it was only because she felt a twinge of conscience on Bob's behalf, and she did not intend to change the

subject by remarking, with what seemed to Cyril inconsequence:

"Poor Bob isn't as good a patient as Sir Martin. He bears pain splendidly; but he gets more and more restless every day, except when Violet is with him, and unfortunately it isn't every day that she can be persuaded to pay him a visit."

"Isn't it?" asked Cyril absently. "That sounds prematurely cynical of her."

Mabel sighed. "I daresay it does; but can you blame her? I can't, though I am sorry for him. It was cynical of her to accept him, if you like to call it so; but I believe she honestly thought at the time that there was nothing else for her to do."

"And does she honestly think now that she is going to throw him over?"

"I don't know. Well, I suppose she would if she could. I don't stand up for her; she hasn't behaved well. At the same time, I do feel that there were excuses, and if only one could do anything to help her or make her happy——"

"One would do it without bothering much about Luscombe?" suggested Cyril. "Oh yes, perhaps so. The misfortune is that one so seldom has it in one's power to make one's neighbours happy—even at somebody else's expense."

"You were saying just now that it was in yours," Mabel observed.

Cyril turned his head and looked hard at her. Again she coloured, and again he misinterpreted that token of mutual discomfort.

"I didn't say that, did I?" he returned. "I said a

good many people would hail my abdication with joy, and I said I asked nothing better than to abdicate. Whether I am at liberty to do so is another question. We didn't quite exhaust the list of those who might claim to have a voice in the matter."

"There is Adela," Mabel acknowledged, her face falling a little.

"Obviously there is Adela; and there is also Sir Martin, who has stuck to me through thick and thin. I don't, somehow, feel that I ought to leave Sir Martin in the lurch."

"Yet you call yourself a thorn in his side."

"There is no doubt that I am; only he doesn't seem anxious to get rid of me. Perhaps he looks upon me as a poor thing of his own, or perhaps, strange as it may appear, he really has a liking for me."

"There would be nothing strange in that," Mabel politely declared; "but I am sure that he likes your brother too, and he can't help seeing what everybody sees. The truth most likely is that he shrinks from taking advantage of your generosity."

"That may be the truth," Cyril agreed; "I shouldn't be surprised if it was. At any rate, I will try to find out."

They had now arrived at the gates of the park, where their roads diverged, and he did not offer to accompany her farther. If what she had said made him feel a trifle sore, he fully recognised that it ought not to have any such effect upon him. What right had he to complain of her "seeing what everybody saw," to use her own phrase, and desiring for him the

release which he had professed to desire for himself? Absolutely none; nor did he complain of her on that score. Possibly, however, a fastidious admirer of hers—and, having admired her so much at one time, he had at least the right to be fastidious—might be permitted to regret a certain anomalous absence of delicacy about her hints. You could not even call them hints, so little had she troubled herself to disguise her meaning, and although Mr. Penrose might naturally enough prefer a landed son-in-law to a penniless one, a less mercenary view might surely have commended itself to his daughter, who would have acres enough of her own some day to let her hand follow her heart. The reason of Hubert's hasty retreat stood revealed; revealed also was a side of Mabel Penrose's character which had hitherto escaped her critic's scrutiny. But does any man ever arrive at full comprehension of any woman? What may safely be conjectured respecting nine-tenths of them is that beneath their impulsiveness, their inconsistency, their love of romance, even their religious tendencies, there lurks a saving determination to do the best thing they can for themselves. Cyril jerked up his shoulders, waved the subject aside with that rather ungallant generality and marched into Kingsmoreton to take counsel of the Rector, from whom, if from no one else, sound and straightforward advice was always to be had.

Mr. Pickering, invaded in his study at grips with next Sunday's sermon, was at first for dismissing the applicant with a recommendation to do nothing in a hurry; but when he perceived that Cyril was quite in earnest, he pushed away his writing materials, wheeled

his chair round, crossed his legs and gave the matter his best attention.

"To save time," said he, "let us admit what I don't admit, that you are wearing shoes which will always gall you. Even so, the alternative of going barefoot isn't to be adopted without a good deal of consideration."

Cyril explained that he had bestowed the amplest consideration upon the alternative, which was not beggary, nor anything like it. "I don't know what Adela's means are," he confessed, "but I presume that they won't be diminished by our marriage."

"Diminished, no; but you can hardly expect Sir Martin to increase them if he is to adopt your brother in your place."

"Of course not. Well then, she will be no worse off than she is. In other words, what she has would suffice to keep us both, supposing that were necessary. But it won't be. With any luck, I ought soon to be earning a steady income. Only yesterday I had a letter from Lord Oswestry, who says he could get me several good commissions if I cared to accept them, and I'm simply dying to accept them! Only, as I tell you, I look upon myself as pledged to Sir Martin."

"Who looks upon himself as pledged to you, eh?" observed the Rector, with a slight smile.

"Oh, you think it's that?"

"Well, I don't think requesting him to throw you overboard is the way to make him do it. If I were in your place—but take note, please, that I express no opinion, one way or the other, as to your wisdom—I

should not approach him with a request; I should merely announce that my mind was made up and that I was sorry I couldn't change it."

This was enough to convince Cyril that the Rector was of the same opinion as Mabel Penrose, whose views and supposed hopes he had not thought it necessary to mention in stating his own.

"Thank you," said he; "I believe you are right, and I'll do as you suggest."

As soon as he was out of the house the Rector threw back his head and laughed. "Now, my dear madam," said he, apostrophising a lady whom he had in his mind's eye, "I rather think you are cornered. If you don't drop that deluded youth like a hot potato, you are not what I take you for."

Perhaps a man who was engaged upon a sermon ought to have been less prone to harsh judgments; but that the aspect of the case which had struck the Rector should have been the first to present itself to the Squire may lend some support to the former's discernment, if at the expense of his charity. Sir Martin, whom Cyril hastened to acquaint with an irrevocable decision, listened patiently and (a little to his informant's surprise) owned that he was in substantial agreement with the considerations submitted to him.

"It is quite true," said he, "that if I were free to choose between you and your brother, I could not hesitate. I shall not hurt your feelings by admitting that, from the point of view of expediency, he is clearly indicated. It is also true that if you deprive me of any choice in the matter, you give me the free-

dom which I couldn't honourably have claimed after all that has passed. But can you honourably throw away a prospect which you have offered to share with another person until you have obtained that person's consent? I don't think you can; so I must ask you to consult Adela before I burn my will and execute a fresh one."

Cyril shook his head. "I am not going to consult Adela, sir," he answered firmly. "As I told you the first day, I believe that she is disinterested, though you don't; but of course I know that she won't approve. No woman who had ambitions for her husband would encourage him to sacrifice a big position. Then there would be discussions and disputes which would alter nothing and are best avoided. I very much prefer to confront her with an accomplished fact."

Sir Martin stroked his chin and had a short, irrepressible laugh, which he converted into a cough. "Upon my word," he began, "I am not sure that, for your own sake——"

But he left that sentence unfinished and started another. "You think that a method which has been employed so successfully with me ought to succeed all round, I suppose. That may be so; facts are convincing things, and it seems to be a fact that you refuse to be my successor at any price. I presume you don't expect me to make a new will this minute, though."

"I wish you would!" said Cyril; "it wouldn't take long."

This time Sir Martin felt at liberty to laugh as

openly as he felt inclined. "Sorry I can't oblige you," he answered, "but any will of mine must contain a multitude of provisions which cry aloud for a lawyer's help. Moreover, I consider it my duty to consult my wife, if you don't think it any part of yours to confer with your intended."

"If that is all," observed Cyril, "you may telegraph to the lawyer at once. It isn't Lady Constantia who will raise difficulties."

She raised none. That same evening she was informed of the change which was in contemplation, and although her comments were restricted and restrained, she did not disguise her opinion that it would be a change for the better. In praise of Cyril's self-abnegation she had no remarks to make; but just as he was seeking the seclusion of the studio upon which he hoped ere long to turn his back for ever, she followed him, touched him on the elbow and said in her cold

never hated you as an individual, if you care to hear that."

Cyril was very glad to hear it. He extended his hand and said something about hoping that they would be better friends for the future; but Lady Constantia ignored words and action alike.

"One thing," she went on, "you must have realised: the experiment of having a third person to live with us has been a total failure. It always would be, and I trust your brother will not be persuaded to attempt it."

"I don't think he will," answered Cyril, who indeed thought it very likely that Hubert would be persuaded to take up his abode at Mannington; "although I fancy you would find him a much more congenial inmate than I have been."

"That is not the question at all. You may think that it would be good for Martin to have young people in the house and to lead a less solitary life; but it would not; it would be the worst thing possible for him. In his state of health, all he needs—all we ask for—is solitude and peace until one of us dies."

Her voice trembled; her tone had become that of a suppliant; her haggard eyes made an appeal which was, after all, not unintelligible. Perhaps she was selfish; yet there was something rather touching in her fierce desire to keep the old man whom she loved and with whom she had shared so many sorrows to herself for the remainder of their joint days.

"I'll caution Hubert," Cyril promised; "I'll tell him how you feel about it."

Lady Constantia thanked him once more, bade

regret it.

CHAPTER XX

VIOLET'S WAGES

To those appointed to die a respite must always appear an inestimable boon at the moment when it is granted; but one may suppose that it does not take them very long to realise how vast is the difference between that and a reprieve. Violet Ord, who, in the first joy of hearing that her wedding day would have to be postponed for three months, almost managed to persuade herself that she was free, grew dull and depressed as the weeks went by without any episode occurring to loosen her fetters and with a great many to keep her in mind of them. Bob lying helpless on his back was less easy to evade than the stalwart lover whom she had displayed such ingenuity in holding at arm's length; in common decency she had to spend at least an hour every day by his bedside, and the intolerable part of this sentry duty was that her entrance to relieve guard was the signal for Mrs. Luscombe's or the nurse's headlong flight. In vain she implored them not to stir. Archly incredulous of her sincerity, they insisted upon leaving her, and no sooner were they out of the room than the invalid became distressingly affectionate. To elude the caresses of a broken-legged man is of course physically practi-

cable; but it is no such simple matter to resist his entreaties, especially when these are backed by premonitory gusts of a temper which inspires you with panic. And, alas! the more she saw of her future husband, whether he was sullen, cheerful, piteous or adoring, the more insufferable did Violet find him. A time came when she was fain to resort to clumsy strategy. She had a headache, or a cold coming on, or letters to write—any excuse must serve where all were so transparently hollow, and Mabel, who was the bearer of them, warned her of their futility.

“I can’t help it,” Violet returned despairingly; “if he suspects that that sort of thing is more than I can stand, he suspects the truth. Surely you might give him a mild hint! I’m ready to play cards with him or read the *Sporting Times* aloud or anything else he likes in reason; but I do draw the line at moist

of Mrs. Luscombe, the amused contempt of her friends and acquaintances—the thought that she must needs face all these made her blood run cold; yet there was one thing to which it seemed that even fear could not drive her, and there was just one faint ray of light discernible through the lowering tempest which she felt herself irresistibly impelled to brave. Hubert would understand why she had done this apparently crazy deed and would despise her no more. It would not, of course, bring her any nearer to him; nothing short of a miracle could accomplish that; but at least he would see that she loved him and that she had it in her to make far greater sacrifices for the sake of love than he had contemplated in his preposterous vision of suburban bliss. It was in this exalted mental condition that she took her cousin into her confidence all of a sudden one afternoon by announcing:

“Mabel, I am going over to Stawell presently to tell Bob that it’s all off. Pray for me! How I shall pull through Heaven alone knows; but I’d rather die than marry him, and—and I’d rather live than die, ghastly as the future looks!”

“Are you in earnest this time?” Mabel asked doubtfully.

“Judge of how much in earnest I am when I tell you that I’d give my ears not to be! But there’s no help for it; I fought as long as I could, and now I’m fairly beaten.”

“By what, I wonder?”

“Suppose we say by my conscience, if we must give it a name. I am sure you would like to think that I had one.”

"I should like very much to think that you had a heart."

"Oh, I've got that too; I can feel it fluttering in my boots. I should tread it out if I attempted to walk; so perhaps you'll order a conveyance of some sort for me."

Mabel did so very willingly. "I'll drive you over myself if you like," she said; but Violet preferred to enter the lists alone, remarking that moral support could avail her nothing in the coming encounter.

"Besides, you wouldn't be able to give it; you would have to own, when you were appealed to, that no language was too abusive to apply to my behaviour."

"I am afraid you must be prepared for some abuse," assented Mabel; "but I don't call it behaving badly to confess the truth, even at the eleventh hour. You'll tell him the whole truth, won't you, Violet? It's the

Violet needed no additional encouragement to pour forth the tale of her sorrows, nor did she plead in vain for a renewal of the affection and condolence which had been denied to her of late. As for comfort, Mabel could only offer it in the form of such oracular assertions as that one should never despair, that the longest lane has a turning, that the darkest hour precedes the dawn, and so forth. She herself, it is true, had a more or less definite hope; but she dared not give utterance to it, and naturally her well-meant phrases did not check the flow of Violet's tears, which had to be hastily dried when Mr. Cyril Hadlow was announced.

Cyril did not guess what Miss Ord was crying about, nor in truth did he very much care. He rather wished that she would take herself off; still he did not allow her presence to deter him from stating the reason of his visit.

"I thought," said he, after shaking hands with Mabel, "you would be glad to hear that the suggestion you made the other day has been acted upon, with the happiest results. The lawyer arrived from London the night before last, and yesterday Sir Martin signed a will under which Hubert becomes heir to the Kingsmoreton estates, *vice* your humble servant, superseded."

Mabel could not repress a cry of joy. Welcome as Cyril's announcement would have been to her under any circumstances, it was doubly so coming, as it did, at this most apposite moment. Prompt indeed had been Violet's reward! But she considerably avoided looking at her cousin and began

to put all the questions which it was only natural to ask. Had Sir Martin yielded at once? What had Lady Constantia said about it? Was Cyril certain that he himself did not repent?

Upon the latter point Cyril was smilingly reassuring. Never, he declared, had an overloaded pack-horse cast off his burden with greater glee than he. If he did not cut capers about the room, it was only out of respect for the furniture. Sir Martin and Lady Constantia were doubtless restrained from standing on their heads by considerations of decorum and physical infirmity; but they were just as mentally jubilant as he was, while anything in the shape of extravagant contortions might be expected of a young gymnast like Hubert when the glad news should reach him. The inflection of mild irony which pervaded these and some similar remarks was

it for granted that Violet would regard Hubert's promotion as a Heaven-sent reward for her own good conduct. She did not realise what Violet instantly perceived, that it must throw doubt and discredit upon a proceeding which purported to be at any rate unworldly. What was likely to be thought of a girl who had lost so little time in breaking faith with one man after hearing of another's vastly improved circumstances? What would Hubert himself think of her? And ten short minutes would have made all the difference! Had Violet only obeyed her first impulse and left the room as Cyril Hadlow entered it, nobody could have ascribed her subsequent conduct to motives of which it would now be impossible for her to prove herself innocent. Such reflections were not of a nature to enliven the drive towards Stawell. Once or twice they even went near to making the ever irresolute Violet abandon her purpose.

From that crowning folly Bob's behaviour, when she was shown into his room with a throbbing head and cold hands, helped to preserve her. Bob, who was now daily lifted out of his bed and deposited on a couch, welcomed his beloved with demonstrations so ardent that, in spite of a somewhat undignified tussle, she could not check them without risk of dragging him to the ground and producing a catastrophe of the first magnitude; so that when at length, breathless and furious, she succeeded in freeing herself, compassion for him was the very last sentiment of which she felt capable.

"You will never do that again!" she panted vindictively. "Never as long as you live! I came here

to tell you that our engagement is at an end. For the last week I have been wanting to tell you, but I was afraid you would get excited and make yourself ill. It is best to speak straight out; one can't break these things gently."

Gently or roughly, she had broken nothing as yet. Bob's round eyes expressed sheer incredulity; his deprecating grin betokened only a qualified penitence. However, he begged pardon, adducing reasons and excuses for his offence which were not qualified in any way and which served to aggravate it. As for persuading him that there was anything worse the matter than one of Violet's not unusual outbreaks of petulance, it was not to be done.

"You've said all that before," was his rejoinder to a statement which would have wounded most lovers to the quick; "it doesn't make any odds. I know well enough that I'm an ugly devil with a rough

can't, that's all. There!—now I hope you are satisfied."

If she hoped that he would be dissatisfied by this revelation, his swift change of countenance must have proved to her that she had attained her object.

"You love somebody else!" he repeated hoarsely, while a dull red colour suffused his cheeks and two perpendicular lines appeared upon his low forehead. "Why didn't you say so before, pray?"

"I have told you why. I wanted to keep my promise to you if I could, and it happened to be quite impossible for me to marry the man whom I loved."

"It *happened!* It isn't impossible any longer, then?"

"Oh yes, it is. At least, I think so. Anyhow, it wasn't with the slightest idea of ever marrying him that I decided to put an end to our engagement."

Bob's fury burst upon her like a thunderclap. "You lie!" he shouted, bringing his fist down with a bang upon the table beside him; "you wouldn't give up your chance of becoming Mrs. Luscombe unless you saw your way pretty clearly to marrying the other fellow. Who is he?"

"I am not going to tell you," answered Violet sullenly.

"You won't, eh? Then I'll tell you. It's my friend Hubert Hadlow. A damned treacherous sort of friend; but that's a matter between him and me——"

"It wasn't his fault," interrupted Violet, suddenly terrified; "it was all mine! He couldn't help loving

me; but he would never have said a word if I hadn't almost forced him to speak, and he went away as soon as he discovered that I cared for him. You can't call that treachery!"

Bob burst out into a loud, scornful laugh. "Oh, don't alarm yourself; I shan't break his bones. He isn't worth that—or, at any rate, you aren't. No; I don't suppose he could help loving you any more than I could. Cursed fools, both of us; but I fancy he'll come out a bit worse off than I shall in the long run, though I grant you that you and he between you have played your game devilish cleverly."

"We haven't played any game. I have never written to him or heard from him since he left."

"Oh, of course not! I suppose you haven't heard either that he has stepped into his brother's shoes as old Sir Martin's heir."

"How do you know that?" exclaimed Violet off

It had reached him through the channels which too often disseminate domestic intelligence and from which few secrets can be kept. Perhaps Sir Martin's butler did not know for certain what was contained in the document to which his master's signature was appended in his presence; but, putting two and two together, he formed a shrewd surmise, which he confided to the housekeeper, who imparted it, under all reserves, to Mrs. Luscombe's maid, who informed her mistress, who told Bob. The latter had only been so far interested that he was glad to hear of his friend's good luck; but with Violet's illuminating confession the whole truth—and even a little more than the truth—had been laid bare to him in an instant. Now, it was never Bob's way to do things by halves. Those whom he deemed worthy of trust he trusted without reserve; but nobody could deceive him twice, and to him Violet's word of honour was merely the word of a young woman who had proved herself dishonourable. He did not even deign to notice her disclaimer, but went on:

“Well, I've been jilted; but one thing I can tell you—it's I who wouldn't marry you now if you went down on your knees to beg me. Though you've served me a dirty trick, you two, and—and”—his voice shook for a moment, while tears of pain and rage rose to his eyes—“though you've hurt me like the devil, I've sense enough to see that I'm well rid of you. I wish Hubert Hadlow joy of his bargain; that's all I've got to say about it.”

After that, Violet felt that he had not left her

much to say about it. She crept away presently, and, having had the good fortune to escape an encounter with Mrs. Luscombe, was soon driving back towards Mannington.

So it was all over! She had regained her liberty, with comparatively little trouble indeed, yet at a price far heavier than she had intended to pay for it, and at the loss of the one hope which had nerved her to rebel. Hubert, who had the best reasons for holding a poor opinion of her, would certainly, on hearing of this rupture, come to the same conclusion as Bob had done. It was not likely that he would renew his vows; nor, even if, as a matter of duty and honour, he should, would she have the face to listen to them? To appeal to Mabel to exonerate her would be too humiliating! Useless also, in all probability, since Mabel's evidence could not be of a kind to banish scepticism.



CHAPTER XXI

EVERYBODY'S OPINION

"Of course," said Mabel, after Violet's rapid exit had left her and her visitor to continue their conversation by themselves, "Adela has been told of this."

"Why of course?" Cyril asked. "No, as a matter of fact, she has not been told yet; but she will be to-morrow or next day, when I shall go up to London to see Hubert." Then, as Mabel made no rejoinder, but raised her eyebrows a shade, he added interrogatively, "You think she won't like it?"

"Well, I must say that I don't think I should quite like it if I were she. I should feel that I ought to have been allowed to put in a word for your sake, if not for my own."

"That is exactly what she will feel, and that is exactly why I begged Sir Martin to say nothing to her until all was settled and done. It would have been almost her duty to dissuade me, so long as the question remained under discussion; but she will see at once that it can't be re-opened, and she understands me too well to have any real regrets on my account."

"Does she?" asked Mabel somewhat dubiously. "Yet you are not so very easy to understand."

"Oh, I'm simply incomprehensible to most of you, no doubt. A man who actually prefers his 'hollow tree, his crust of bread and liberty' to the golden fetters of squiredom! Adela has taken my measure, though."

Nothing seemed more probable to his hearer than that Adela had just failed to accomplish that feat. For the rest, she did not altogether enjoy being denounced by implication as dull and sordid; yet, bearing in mind that Cyril, whatever he might be pleased to say, had behaved with rare generosity, she rejoined meekly enough:

"You are a little bit too hard upon us perhaps. Even if we can't quite see our way to supporting existence upon a crust, we don't all of us regard



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"I can't get up more than a sort of disrespectful compassion for her. The fact remains, you see, that she hasn't broken with him."

Mabel opened her lips, drew in her breath, paused for a moment to deliberate, and finally decided that she ought to vindicate her misjudged cousin.

"If I tell you something," she began, "will you promise not to betray me?"

"Certainly I will," he answered.

"After all, it is only fair and right that you should know. Well then, she has gone to Stawell now to break off her engagement. She told me all about it before you came, and her mind was fully made up, and the carriage was ordered for her. So you see——!"

Naturally, Cyril did not see all that this statement was supposed to make clear to him; but he hastened to acknowledge that he had been premature in his condemnation of Miss Ord. "One can only hope," said he, "that she will never repent of this afternoon's work."

"I don't think she ever will, and I don't think you will ever repent of yesterday's."

"You may be sure that I shall not. I repent of nothing and envy nobody. Not even Hubert, lucky as I must call him."

"Oh, *you* don't consider him lucky," returned Mabel, laughing; "but if he considers himself so, that's sufficient, isn't it?"

"Quite sufficient; and, with apologies for contradicting you, I do think him lucky and enviable—in every way."

This was Cyril's method of conveying discreet congratulations. It was met by the same odd absence of embarrassment which had jarred upon him on a previous occasion. Mabel laughed again, shook her head sceptically and remarked :

“Well, at all events, you can't doubt any longer that you had it in your power to make somebody besides your brother supremely happy.”

“I am glad,” he replied, with some formality, “to have been able to do that at such a small personal sacrifice.”

Nevertheless, as he walked away soon afterwards, he had the sense of having sacrificed, or at any rate lost, something which left him poorer. At no time, unless for a brief period over yonder across the sea, amongst the bosky glades of Fontainebleau, had he idealised Mabel Penrose; always he had perceived

too, she had shown herself equally sensible, equally insensible. Could she allow to no woman, then, a little of that redeeming capacity for divine folly which preserves humanity from blank materialism?

It must be confessed that the association of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow with a capacity for divine folly would have struck most of that lady's acquaintances as more than a trifle quaint. Amongst the humbler, but not the least shrewd of these was old Jacob Beer, who intercepted Cyril on the outskirts of Kingsmoreton with a request for confirmation of rumours which had come to his ears.

"They was tellin' me that Squire hev' a-scratched yure name out of 's will an' put yure young brother down 'stead of 'ee," said he; "but I can't 'ardly credit that."

"Between you and me, it is a fact, Jacob," answered Cyril, "and the thing has been done by my own request. I don't know how you came to hear of it, though."

"Aw, ma dear, 'tis everybody's secret why that ther' lawyer chap wer' sent vur! Now I wun't zay as I'm 'stonished at 'ee, knawin' 'ee as I du, nor yet I wun't zay but what yu med be right, in a manner o' spakin'——"

"Thank you, Jacob."

"Vur squires be squires, an' hartisses be hartisses."

"Just so; you couldn't have put the case more succinctly."

"An' 'tis vulishness tryin' to make man or baste swaller what they've no stammick vur. But a married man bain't vree vur to pick 's own vittels, and you 'm

all one 's married to Mrs. Spencer now. How iver come her to let 'ee du this, then?"

Cyril had to repeat the admission that he had made to a previous questioner, and with much the same result. Jacob shook his head slowly and drew his hand across his chin, which gave forth a sound as of a match being scraped against a wall.

"More 'n my old missus 'd take from me, an' her bain't no tartar neither," was his laconic comment.

"Well," said Cyril, laughing, "I don't think anybody can call my future wife a tartar. She happens to be one of the most reasonable people in the whole world, so I am not afraid of having my ears boxed when I make my confession to her the day after to-morrow."

"Wonderful," exclaimed Jacob, throwing up his

intended wife was being discussed with a freedom which it scarcely became him to encourage; so he brought the colloquy to a close. Jacob's conception of Adela as an infuriated virago rather tickled him; he could not imagine her venting her "bitter rage" by indulging in strong language or smashing the crockery, however incensed she might be. At the same time, there was no denying that she would have some *prima facie* right to complain of the manner in which she had been treated.

Happily no one else possessed any such right. His mother, who, upon the strength of a somewhat enlarged income, had migrated from Royal Avenue to a more cheerful residence in South Kensington, would not suffer in any way, and he hastened to supplement the intelligence, which he conveyed to her in London twenty-four hours later, by a promise to that effect. He said:

"Sir Martin insists upon making a pensioner of me. At first he was for continuing the allowance that he has been giving me, but that I couldn't agree to, and we ended by a compromise, which will still leave me much better off than I have any business to be. So I shall be able to go on helping you just the same."

"My dear boy," protested the startled lady, "you don't allow me time to recover my breath! All this sounds very splendid of you, and—well, I suppose you and Sir Martin know best, and of course it is a grand thing for Hubert; but——"

"I know what you are going to say," interrupted Cyril; "you are going to inquire whether I have

consulted Adela. No, I haven't; but if you will consider for a moment, I am sure you will see that it was wiser not to do so."

After considering a moment, as she was bidden, Mrs. Hadlow confessed herself unable to arrive at that conclusion.

"I don't know," she began, "what Adela's income may be——"

"Oh, nor do I," interpolated Cyril, as though that were a matter of altogether secondary importance.

Mrs. Hadlow made a gesture of dismay. "And yet you impoverish yourself without even taking her advice!"

"Yes, because I knew what her advice was bound to be, and I knew I couldn't act upon it. Naturally, she would like me to be rich; only, in reality, there

had to impart to him on his return from the City, was sobered by a thought which caused him to exclaim, "But I say, old man, how about Mrs. Spencer?"

"The next person who mentions Adela to me in connection with this matter," returned Cyril, "will encounter either physical violence or verbal insult, according to sex. Hang it all! am I asked to believe that she only agreed to marry me for the sake of my expectations?"

Hubert begged pardon. He had not meant to make any injurious charge against Mrs. Spencer, he said; only, when it came to a question of marriage, ways and means had to be considered.

"As for you, you have such a magnificent contempt for money that one hardly ventures even to thank you for flinging riches at one's head. All the same, I can't help being grateful beyond words. You see, it isn't only that you have delivered me from the counting-house—between ourselves, I do believe that infernal counting-house would have been the death of me in a year!—it's—it's——"

"The ways and means towards a certain end?" suggested Cyril, smiling.

Magnanimously abstaining from comparisons between Adela's attitude and that of another lady in respect thereto, he simply added: "I don't forbid you to thank me for having incidentally furnished you with them, and I think I may promise that you are awaited with open arms by—shall I call her by her name, or would you rather I didn't?"

The two brothers were in Hubert's bedroom, dress-

... think you had
shire full speed without some be
deigned to give us."

"Well, it was out of the que
another day. Of course I had
her at all; but the fact is that
myself! So then nothing remain
And now you really think—eh?"

"I really think," answered C
better apply to headquarters.
honour me with any direct mess

"Oh, she wouldn't do that;
expect it, though I know she's
Very likely she thinks things a
Luscombe, and, for the matter
especially after his having smashe
when all's said and done, she neve
him."

"Who never pretended to lo
Cyril, open-mouthed.

"Why, Violet of course. You
talking about Miss D. ..."

"Violet?"

"No; Miss Penrose. Not that it particularly signifies what she thought of me; only I'm sorry that I thought what I did of her. She and I had a talk yesterday afternoon, and we managed—I can't imagine how—to remain at cross purposes the whole time. I understand now why she made such a point of Miss Ord's having broken off her engagement before she heard that you were to step into my shoes."

"Is that so?" cried Hubert eagerly. "By Jove, I *am* glad."

No wonder he was glad. A man as much in love as he was will contrive, by hook or by crook, to make any conduct on the part of the beloved one fit in with his ideas of perfection; still it is undeniably more pleasant to be spared such moral sleight of hand, and Hubert's beatitude was so complete that he paid little attention to what his brother had to say in qualification of a statement which was not quite literally accurate.

"I don't care two straws about that," he declared; "she meant to chuck Luscombe, whatever happened, and that's enough for me."

"I now remember," observed Cyril, with tardy contrition, "that Miss Penrose told me in confidence what her cousin's intentions were, and that I promised not to betray them."

"Oh, that be blowed! Promises made under a total misapprehension don't count. Besides, I'm sure she must have meant you to let me know. I say, do you think I might run down to Kingsmoreton to-morrow?"

no invitation from Sir Martin, v
contemplate being invaded by him

"As a matter of fact," Cyr
whether you will ever be asked
proving that three in a house n
poor old people have had their
them, at all events, doesn't ha
You had better write to Miss (
impatience until her answer com

Hubert had to admit, with sc
this would be the correct course
then," said he, "I should think th
ask me down to Mannington, shou

"Well, no," answered Cyril, lau
the truth, I shouldn't. I should
all the circumstances, Mr. Penrose
true that Luscombe is on his be
so that there would be no risk
still that doesn't seem like a ve
flaunting you under the injured r
No. I am afraid it is

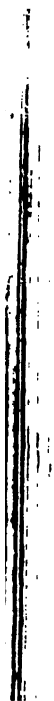
pathetic. It struck his mother as both; but, like a wise woman, she held her peace, realising that she had no power to control issues, and deeming it best to await what the morrow should bring forth.

Her suspense was not to be so speedily relieved; for when Cyril walked round to Sloane Gardens after breakfast the next morning, he was met by the unexpected intelligence that Mrs. Spencer had just left for Kingsmoreton Court.

"Wasn't that rather sudden?" Cyril asked the butler.

"Very sudden indeed, sir," the man replied; "there wasn't 'ardly time for the maid to pack. I think a letter came this morning, but I reelly couldn't say. I 'ope there's no bad news of Sir Martin, sir?"

Cyril hoped not, and thought it unlikely. Surely he also would have received a letter or a telegram if anything had been amiss. It seemed a good deal more probable that some officious correspondent had informed Adela of what had hitherto been concealed from her, and for the first time he became sensible of compunctious misgivings. He pictured Adela arriving at Kingsmoreton with legitimate and possibly indignant queries; he saw Sir Martin's courteous embarrassment and Lady Constantia's grim triumph; he felt instinctively that he ought to be on the spot. Was there yet time? He looked at his watch and found that he could just catch the second express for the west. He had intended, in any case, to return on the following day, Sir Martin having requested him to do so; his appearance twenty-four hours in advance of his time



CHAPTER XXII

ADELA TAKES STEPS

To quit the field after a victory must always be to incur some degree of risk; but Adela Hadlow, though aware of this, had come to the conclusion that it would be, on the whole, more diplomatic, as it would certainly be pleasanter, for her to take a holiday from the company of an implacable mother-in-law. She had her own plans for the future, which she proposed to divulge in due season and which would conduce to the comfort and advantage of everybody concerned; meanwhile, friction was best avoided. She knew, too, that Cyril would miss her at every turn, which was just what she wanted him to do, and if he should commit sundry blunders for the want of her guidance, as he doubtless would, so much the more would her tact be recognised when the time came for her to set them right. It had not for one moment occurred to her, however, that he could be guilty of a blunder so colossal and gratuitous as the abandonment of his inheritance, much less that he would adopt that or any other measure of importance without her sanction. Thus it was that the revelation of his amazing folly fell upon her like a bolt from the blue.

letter that she examined at
Stawell Abbey in large capital
punctuated and illegible in
Mrs. Luscombe, which appear-
lessly written, was of a
recipient also of breath.
lucidity, its purport and ob-
Not only had Violet Ord j
had done so for the avo-
Hadlow, with whom she had
clandestine intrigue, had r-
the Kingsmoreton property
By whom this wicked and
hatched Mrs. Luscombe de-
conjecture, but at any rat-
that Adela was privy to it.

"I feel sure that you
ceived as we have, and th-
to you. Of course it may
and no doubt most peopl-
ought to be only too gla-



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write at his instigation, he says it is all over and in his brave, generous way he vows he doesn't care, but it is easy to see that his heart is *broken!* I cannot help hoping that it is *not* all over and that the mischief may yet be repaired. After all, she may have been tempted and led away—she is so frivolous, alas!—and it seems impossible that she should *really* prefer such a very commonplace youth as Mr. Hubert Hadlow to Bob! My feeling is that if he could only be extinguished by the destruction of this iniquitous will, which poor Sir Martin must have made under pressure and when he was *not quite himself*, she would perhaps return to her senses. And then I, for one, should be willing to forgive and forget. Could you not help? A great wrong has been done to you also, and the more I think of it the more convinced I am that it has been done without your knowledge. You are too”—(here several words were very carefully erased)—“right-minded to let your future husband be robbed in such a barefaced manner, even if he *is*, as we are assured he is, a consenting party.”

Whatever else Adela might or might not be, she was always clear-headed and always cool. She wasted no time in vain ejaculations of dismay, nor did she lose her temper, which proves that she was indeed a woman in a thousand. What she did was to scribble off a telegram to Kingsmoreton, announcing her arrival for that afternoon; after which she rang the bell and gave the necessary orders to her maid. Most certainly she did not intend to let Cyril be robbed, and although he doubtless deserved the

mused, on the way to
collusion with that unscrupulous
whom it will be my duty
obliged to upset Violet's littleness
society has no law."

She felt so serenely confident
other people turn their backs on
the long journey did not matter
when she reached her destination
at all to learn that Cyril had
on the previous day. The
which had taken him thither
a vision of his chapfallen aspect
that he had arrived too late to
her. For the rest, her task was
frustrated by his absence. Lady
was with Sir Martin, who had
Her ladyship had sent down
Spencer wished to see her
be in the boudoir at a quarter



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she carried a heavier weight of metal than the enemy. She changed her dress, had some tea, glanced through a few illustrated papers and punctually at the appointed hour entered the redoubtable presence with her accustomed air of slightly sleepy composure.

Lady Constantia, who received her standing, did not even extend a welcoming hand. Her ladyship knew there was going to be a set-to and disdained the preliminary conventionalities of the ring. She said:

“You have seen Cyril, I suppose?”

“Just missed him,” answered Adela, sitting down; “but I heard this morning what you and he had been about during my absence, and—here I am.”

Lady Constantia nodded. “I may as well tell you at once that your coming here can do neither good nor harm. What is done is done. You have some cause of quarrel with Cyril, no doubt; but that is for you and him to settle between you. For my own part, I don’t mind saying that I think he acted wisely in retiring from an impossible position, and still more wisely in concealing his intentions from you until they had been carried into effect.”

“Because I should never have allowed him to carry them into effect, do you mean?” asked Adela placidly. “Yes, there would be something in that if wills were irrevocable. Fortunately or unfortunately, they aren’t. Unfortunately, from your point of view, I should say, because it will be so awkward for you to have to tell Hubert that you have

to, and indeed proposed, by him
whether your influence over
imagine; but whether it is
father-in-law's, not his."

"Oh, I forget nothing," A
even remember some things
borne in mind if you hadn't
hurry to steal a march up
don't want to give more to
You will have to acknowledge
been made, that's all, and
amends are due to Hubert,
with a legacy? The estate c

Lady Constantia frowned.
your object may be in taking
said she curtly; "it seems to
must be perfectly well aware
suade your father-in-law to a

"I haven't the slightest int
replied: "I shall leave it to yo

"To me!"

"It is so odd of you not to see! Why, if it comes to that, should I submit to flagrant injustice? You don't, of course, credit me with caring an atom for Cyril; you think I inveigled him into proposing to me simply because I wanted to recover the prospect that I had lost, and if I laid claim to any other motive you wouldn't believe me."

"To be honest with you, Adela, I should not. It is disagreeable to have to say such things, but I cannot tell a direct falsehood."

"Oh, don't mind me; I'm case-hardened. Well then, as you haven't a doubt about my absolute selfishness, how can you expect me to surrender without a word? Because you know that by saying a word, or rather by threatening to say it, I can always bring you to your knees."

Anger, disgust and incredulity were depicted in swift succession upon Lady Constantia's features; but neither her knees nor her back bent.

"I did not think," said she in a low tone, "that even you would stoop to that!"

Adela shrugged her shoulders. "I dislike stooping as much as you profess to dislike insulting me; but you shouldn't drive me into a corner. I'll come out of it, with my mouth as tightly shut as ever, upon the condition that you get Sir Martin to revoke this very unfair will. Otherwise I shall regretfully inform him of your real reason for imploring him not to put up a memorial window to Reggie in the church."

For a moment Lady Constantia looked downright murderous. She controlled herself, however, and said,

warrant, not I. Nothing would
to hurt the poor old man."

"Except hurting yourself!
stantia bitterly. "You are a
and I am sure you would not
wicked thing if you could see
doing it; only, as it happens,
the truth about that unhappy
Martin wish himself dead, if it
right; but there is no reason
him alter his will."

"None whatever. I fancy, then,
rather make him alter a dozen
hear the truth. And unless you
this one, I shall tell him the truth."

"Out of sheer useless malignity."

"If you like to call it so,
that it will be done."

"Never while I have bodily
you from approaching him!"

Adela laughed. "That is a

batants looked one another straight in the face. It was the elder's eyelids that fell first. Neither in physical nor in moral courage was she deficient, so far as she herself was concerned; but for the husband whom she had so long and so successfully shielded from perils of well-nigh daily recurrence she was something of a coward. There is no knowing what compromise she might not have proposed, or whether she might not even have been reduced to unconditional surrender, if at this moment the door had not been flung open to admit Cyril, who had arrived from the railway station in the nick of time. She turned at the sight of him and almost threw herself into his arms.

"Thank God you have come!" she amazed him by ejaculating.

Adela, lying back in her chair, kissed the tips of her fingers to him and looked languidly diverted. She could not have been feeling altogether comfortable; but, as always, she had her countenance well under command.

"I went to Sloane Gardens this morning to see you," Cyril began, addressing himself to her, "and I was told that you had just left for Kingsmoreton in a hurry; so I thought——"

Lady Constantia cut him short with—"Your instinct was sound. You have come in time, I hope, to save us all. I do not suppose that you have any great liking for me—it would be strange if you had—but I believe that you are really attached to Martin, and in any case, you are a gentleman." She paused for an instant and then, pointing at her

daughter-in-law, "I am ordered," she resumed, "to make my husband tear up the will that you know of, and that order is backed by a threat which——"

"My dear Lady Constantia," interrupted Cyril in his turn, "there can be no question of orders or threats in the matter; something must have been said which you have misunderstood. Very likely I may appear to—to some people to have acted foolishly; but you and I know that, on the contrary, I never did a wiser thing in my life than when I begged Sir Martin to let me go free, and of course I should not part with my liberty now even if I could—which is a total impossibility."

Lady Constantia was about to speak; but Adela rose gracefully, laid her hand on Cyril's arm and said, with a smile: "Oh, you can't be allowed to commit suicide. We won't argue now, though; we'll go and dress for dinner instead. I'll tell you

I can. My husband still believes, and I trust he always will, that our son lost his life as a British officer and a gentleman should. It was not so. He disgraced himself, and I suppose, if he had survived, he would have been cashiered. I have never understood," poor Lady Constantia went on, forcing each word out with an effort which seemed to give her actual bodily pain, "how such an awful thing can have come to pass; they say anybody may be seized with an overwhelming, unaccountable panic—I don't know. What happened was that he turned and ran, and one of his own men shot him. That is all."

She stopped for a moment, but held up both her hands to implore silence, though Cyril had not been going to speak.

"By the mercy of God," she continued, "Martin was very ill at the time when the news came. We were able to keep the newspapers from him and, as you may suppose, nobody was cruel enough to wish that he should hear the truth. So it has gone on all this long time. The story was hushed up, as far as such stories can be; but there have been plenty of allusions to it, publicly and privately, and I have lived—I still live in constant terror of some catastrophe. And the difficulties have been enormous! You can understand now why I was so averse to your coming to live with us, and why I hope that your brother will not do that. Every additional person in the house must be an additional danger."

Cyril instinctively held out his hand. She took it in hers, which was hot and dry; their eyes met, and the mutual comprehension exchanged in that glance sufficed.

"You are wondering," Lady Constantia went on, "why I make this dreadful confession to you now. It is because I must; it is because my daughter-in-law has threatened to tell Sir Martin everything unless you are given back your inheritance."

Adela, still smiling, met Cyril's astounded gaze without the least apparent discomposure. "I must go and dress," said she. "Don't let us be late for dinner, though the skies fall."

She swept out of the room in her languid, graceful way, and instantly Lady Constantia darted after her. Cyril heard their voices outside; he heard Adela laugh, and presently there came the sound of a closing door. Then Lady Constantia returned, breathing quickly.

"I was afraid," the poor woman explained. "She might have been going straight to Martin for any-



CHAPTER XXIII

RELEASE

BLESSED are the conventions which rule the life of civilised man. Galling they are at times and ludicrously inapposite; yet they tend, upon the whole, towards the maintenance of indispensable discipline, they afford time for the subsidence of excited passions, and serve to remind us that no situation in this world was ever bettered by an undignified broil. The three persons who had parted in an atmosphere charged with electricity met again presently under conditions which compelled outward urbanity, and one of them, at all events, if he had no great appetite for dinner, was insensibly soothed by the truce which had to be observed in the presence of watchful servants. Adela, who sat opposite to him, clad in palest pink, and with three rows of pearls around her slim throat, did not perhaps stand in so much need of calming influences as he did, and perhaps it was scarcely to her credit that she needed them so little; still he could not but admire her perfect self-possession, could not help being grateful for the flow of facile and amusing chatter about her recent visits to country houses which she addressed to a somewhat irresponsible audience. As for Lady Constantia, nobody ever expected her to

least, Cyril imagined to be the
communication from the butle
Constantia to rise and leave th
left face to face with his be
unpalatable task, he was about
when Adela staved off the bad
as coolly as though there had l
urgent importance to discuss:

“So Violet has transferred her

“Well, it doesn't seem to hav
that required transferring,” and
have heard about her and Hub

“At full length in a letter
this morning. In fact, that's
shrieked to me for assistance.
frantic, and so should I be if
of an angel. The way that w
she and I! Come now; isn't
beyonds to jilt a man after you
ordered and to take up with
has just enriched himself by a

heard that Hubert was to replace me. As it happened, she did hear the news from me just as she was starting from Mannington for Stawell; but it didn't influence her in any way. Miss Penrose told me so after she had gone."

Adela smiled. "If Mabel and you expect that yarn to be believed, you will have to relate it to the marines, I'm afraid. Not that it particularly signifies; for it will soon be a case of 'as you were' all round."

"You can't seriously imagine that, Adela! At least, if you do, you must set me down as the weakest of created beings."

"No; only your strength is apt to be misdirected. Hatching this plot without so much as a hint to me was a pretty strong measure, for instance. Almost too strong, don't you think so?"

"I daresay it was a mistake; but I thought useless discussions were best avoided, and I—well, I trusted you."

"Good gracious! who but you would say such an original thing as that! Do you generally display your trust in people by robbing them when they are looking the other way?"

"Oh, if you only regard it from that point of view, I won't attempt to excuse myself."

"It strikes me that you wouldn't find it an easy matter to excuse yourself from any point of view. To say that you kept me in the dark because you didn't want to have the bother of arguing is all very well as a candid explanation, but it hardly counts as an excuse, does it? Do you feel at all ashamed of yourself, may I ask?"

of that—you will at least stay
from interfering while I put
not extraordinarily angry with
angry as I ought to be. I
happened has been a good deal
away and leaving you at the
wanted something which you,
your soul, were ready enough
aren't going to have it, though

“But indeed they are! S
siderations aside, both Sir Ma
now by the promise which has
It is simply incomprehensible to
doubt it.”

“My dear man, you forget
that was made to me.”

“I certainly don't remember
I should stick to an unwelcome
thick and thin.”

“Don't be disingenuous, Cy
how unbecoming it is.”



"I give you that chance."

"Thanks so much; but the point is that you should have given it sooner. A man can't help smashing his face in an accident; self-mutilation is another affair. Of course when I accepted you, I accepted all you had to offer. Really I don't quite know what you offer me now. The privilege of supporting you upon an income which doesn't support me?"

He mentioned the amount of the annual allowance which Sir Martin had thrust upon him, adding that his professional earnings were likely to reach a quite substantial figure in the future. "Nevertheless, it remains true that my pecuniary value has had a rather heavy fall since you consented to marry me. I am sorry, and I can only repeat that you are at liberty to cry off the bargain."

Adela, who had been munching bonbons, picked one out of the little silver dish in front of her and tossed it across the table to him.

"Eat that," she said, "and try to be sweetened by it. It is I who have a right to look sour, not you. I wonder what you and Mabel talked about after you had made the remarkable discovery that there was nothing between her and your brother."

"I didn't make that discovery while I was talking to her; I only made it when I saw Hubert yesterday. What has Miss Penrose to do with the question?"

"The question of your evident anxiety to be released, do you mean? Well, it's imaginable that she might have a good deal to do with it. You aren't going

wouldn't be because I am 11
it would be because of wha
dinner."

"Oh, come upstairs and le
studio," said Adela, pushing
an aroma of Constantia abou
to have infected you. You
talk in her voice!"

A cheerful fire was blazin
evenings had begun to grow
into a low chair beside it,
and said, with a very fair
manner:

"If I were anxious to l
I am, but if I were—it v
are so disappointingly mat
because I have such a wolfis
dinner."

"I never asked you to g
returned, "and I don't thi
matter-of-fact as to believe

Cyril drew a breath of relief. "You didn't mean it then?"

"As if I could! Let it be supposed that I am cruel enough and mean enough; even so I couldn't have afforded it. Don't you know—I'm sure I must have told you—that my beloved father-in-law stands between me and bankruptcy? Is it likely that I should have incurred his hatred for the sake of gratifying my spite? I wanted to frighten Constantia, and I did frighten her; she was on the verge of caving in when you descended upon us in that ill-timed way and spoilt the whole show."

"Well, it's something that you were not serious," Cyril acknowledged; "still I can't understand your having had the heart to pretend that you were."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Needs must when such impetuous people as you drive. I couldn't afford to be over nice in my choice of weapons. There are so many luxuries, you see, that one can't afford."

"Including the luxury—if it is one—of marrying an artist who has only a few hundreds of assured income to bless himself with?"

"Really," answered Adela, laughing, "if you can't understand my hardness of heart, I must confess that yours surprises me a little. Do I give you the idea of being the sort of woman to accept poverty gaily? But as we aren't going to be poor, we won't fight over that."

She still clung with strange tenacity to what she called their joint rights, still intended and expected to regain these by hook or by crook. There were half-a-dozen ways of managing the matter, she declared; all she asked of him was to remain quiescent

debt were supposed to have accumulations, but to set a Kingsmoreton leases have for rational management the plan more profitable than it is. and you'll live to thank me for my salvation."

In vain Cyril protested that she had been taken; she paid no attention to what he said than she would have been an irresponsible infant, and indeed she regarded him as tantamount to a nuisance. At rest, she was affectionate, cheerful, and well humoured. He ended by firing a volley of abuse; for nothing could be made of him; he had no conscience in the ordinary term.

The butler, who interrupted the coffee, had the air of wishing to be asked by Cyril whether an answer was required:

The man thought not. "But perhaps you would see Dr. Lee presently, sir; I believe he was asking whether you were here."

Adela had turned white. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed, after the butler had left the room, "what if the old man were to die?"

What indeed! Conscience or no conscience, pardonable or otherwise, she stood revealed at that moment, to Cyril's sense, as an unlovely symbol of scared greed. It blazed in her eyes, it betrayed itself in her drawn-back lips and in the accentuated horizontal lines on her brow; so that while he scanned her, he had the impression—an erroneous one possibly, but not the less vivid for that—of beholding the real Adela for the first time.

"That would be a simplifying event, no doubt," he observed drily.

He did not, for his own part, consider it a probable one. Sir Martin's attacks of angina were always and of necessity serious; but he had rallied from them times out of mind, and the chances were that he would rally once more. What, alas! admitted of no resuscitation was Adela's charm—such as it had been.

She quickly composed her countenance; but her attempts to revert to the light and confident tone which she had hitherto affected were not a success. She talked at random; she threw away her cigarette and did not light another; she was obviously on tenterhooks, and Cyril felt sure that she would have made straight for the sick man's room if she had dared. After a time Dr. Lee, a stout, grey-headed man, stepped softly in, closing the door behind him.

from simple
pain. Lady Constantia is
she always bears trouble, and
her share of troubles, poor
to say that she will see you
not to-night."

A long sigh broke from Ad
and Dr. Lee, after looking at

"I can't stay any longer
who is in a bad way. Well
and, to be honest, I can't
kind old friend has done
hardly a blessing to him of

Cyril accompanied the do
absent for a few minutes. V
was standing by the fireside,
piece and one foot extended t
was staring meditatively. Sh
near, and remarked:

"This is conclusive."

"Best so," answered Cyril;
done about it. I have

isn't best so. I should have made something of you, whereas Mabel, whom you will inevitably espouse now, won't even try, and wouldn't succeed if she did. Still what can't be can't be, and I have at least the consolation of knowing that I don't inflict any poignant distress upon you by setting you free."

His ingrained inability to tell lies kept him silent for a moment; but presently he put forward a mild remonstrance.

"Don't be so hasty, Adela; there is always plenty of time to dismiss a man who, I assure you, doesn't dream of espousing anybody else—least of all Miss Penrose. This is hardly the moment for us to be thinking about ourselves, is it?"

"I can't imagine any subject of reflection more appropriate to the moment. What has happened has simply put the extinguisher upon our little project. Or would you rather call it *my* little project? Either way, it's extinguished—and I'm sorry."

Possibly her sorrow was not wholly mercenary; possibly she cared as much for Cyril Hadlow as she had it in her to care for anybody. Her eyes and her smile were half wistful, half ironical. But that Sir Martin's death put Cyril out of the question as a husband was, in her view, self-evident.

Cyril, it must be owned, did not try very hard to modify her view. He repeated what he had already said about his prospects and mentioned that, to his certain knowledge, provision had been made for him in Sir Martin's will; but she smiled at the idea of setting up house upon such a pittance, adding, with a wry face:

"And the worst of it is that I very much doubt whether any additional provision has been made for me."

He was glad when she left him, glad to be released, glad above all that she had exhibited her true character to him in time. It is not quite certain, however, that she had done that. Most women, according to Pope, have no characters at all, and this one was dowered with such contradictory qualities that it would have taken a more skilled student of her sex than Cyril to diagnose her.

Adela did not appear at breakfast the next morning; but shortly after midday, when he was gazing out of the studio window and wondering why Lady Constantia did not send for him, Cyril saw the station brougham crossing the park, with luggage on the roof; immediately after which a note was brought to him.

"*Levo Finconnado*," Adela wrote. "There is no

"after what you heard last night, you cannot be. Nobody can be, not even I. Yet it seems hard that I must thank God for having taken my husband from me. He was all I had left in the world, you see."

"It is cruelly hard," said Cyril.

"I suppose I must have deserved it, though, or it would not have happened to me. Martin never deserved ill of anybody; perhaps that is why he was spared the worst of all our misfortunes. He used to think that he had been too severe with Reggie; but he was not. It was I who was severe with all my children; if I had been more indulgent they might have cared for me more than they did—who knows? I did my duty as I saw it, and I should act in just the same way again, I daresay."

She spoke quite calmly, though with the infinite sadness of one who at the end of all perceives that all has been inevitable. That was not her professed creed; but it was too nearly akin to Cyril's for him to answer her. He took the only means open to him of evincing sympathy by recalling instances of Sir Martin's constant kindness and patience, and Lady Constantia's stern visage relaxed while she listened.

"Martin was fond of you," she said; "he was a very good judge of men and women. Although he never said so, I fancy he knew as well as I did that he was doing you a great service in one way by altering his will."

"In every way," Cyril declared.

"Well, that is as may be; but at all events in the one. Adela has left you already, I hear. For always?"

He made a sign of assent.

her. That atrocious threat
in earnest."

Lady Constantia shook her
rejoinder. "What will you
she asked, after a minute.

"What I used to dream of
when I could only dream of
"I shall go abroad for a year
to make the most of my one
a talent—a mere affair of mine
but it may be developed into
and, thanks to Sir Martin's
all hack work now."

"Martin always wished to
Lady Constantia said, with a
voice; "it went against the
inherit you, even though you were
But, with your notions, you were
happy or successful here."

"Never in the world! I
the first, and a square near I."

some possible evening sunshine for her as the quasi-grandmother of Hubert's children; but to offer her the prospect of consolation in that shape would have required rather more courage than he could muster, and she left the room without further allusion to the future.

Cyril, when he was once more alone, reviewed the events of the previous eighteen months and repeated to himself that he was indeed lucky beyond his deserts. During that time how much he had gained, and how much he had escaped? A large fortune for Hubert and a modest, yet sufficient, one for himself on the one side; on the other an almost impossible emprise, complicated by marriage with a woman to whose somewhat alarming deficiencies he could not be blind, disposed though he was, now that he had escaped her, to take a charitable view of them. As an escape also he must count it that he had so satisfactorily quenched that nascent passion of his for Mabel Penrose. With her, to be sure, there could have been no question of marriage, for the very good reason that she would not have married him. Nevertheless, she might have caused him considerable suffering, had events taken a different turn; so that, upon the whole, there was nothing to deplore in a misapprehension which had done nobody any harm. It was true that—like poor Lady Constantia, if in a much less degree—he was rather lonely; but an artist, after all, must needs be a good deal alone if he is to produce any work worth producing. And how infinitely better it is to be the loneliest of artists than the most richly endowed of square pegs!

ONE afternoon in midwinter Hadlow were together in the Court, the former having just the latter to follow her through a large and somewhat noisy hall.

"Well," said he, taking a hearthrug, with his back to her now?"

"It's only about Cyril," V. be here in about half an hour, you had better be told what to what not to say. Do you know

"I humbly hoped that he his fond family again after all years. That's why mother and isn't it?"

"Oh, of course. But his hope and think so—is that



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“Such a thing has never been referred to once by either of us. His letters have been almost entirely concerned with his godson and with dry-point etching.”

“Much you know about dry-point etching!”

“And very likely he would have been to write me pages and pages upon that subject if he hadn’t wanted to draw information out of me upon a different one, about which I do happen to know something!”

“But I thought you said it hadn’t been referred to.”

“As if there was the least difficulty in writing about things without referring to them!”

“Have you been leading him on, then?”

“With the utmost delicacy and discretion.”

“Because, you know, Vi, it strikes me that you’ve discovered a mare’s nest. I don’t believe old Cyril is much of a marrying man; but even if he does want to marry Miss Penrose, it don’t follow that she wants to marry him.”

“Oh, there never was the slightest doubt about *that*,” Violet calmly returned; “I knew ages ago that she loved him all to bits! The difficulty is that they’re both proud, and they both think they can get along quite well without one another. That’s why I’m telling you this. You will have to imitate me by being delicate and discreet.”

“I’ll be anything you tell me to be. All the same, I don’t quite see what’s to hinder two people who are in love with one another from saying so.”

“It’s the easiest thing in the world to hinder them. What put them off in the first instance was that they

"Oh, naturally she thought pins for her. That's unimpeachable so much afraid of her shying. Once let him suspect that we are our hats behind him and he'll be again."

"I can't believe he is such a fellow, Hubert, laughing."

"Well, he is. He doesn't fool me. Heiress, you see. We are quite sure we had sense enough to understand the moment that we loved one another. That's all to be said."

"H'm! I seem to remember a lot more to say, and that's the common bad time of it before the good reason."

"My only consolation," returned she, "did give you a bad time. You don't believe that I should have done so, whether you had been rich or poor, or nobody else ever has. By the way, the

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frozen-out people. Ida met him the other day, and she says he means to come back to Stawell at last next summer."

"Will you mind?"

"Not unless he does, and of course he won't. One can't keep that sort of thing up for a year and a half."

"What sort of thing? Being in love? Well, your remarks have the merit of candour, at all events, my dear."

At this point the colloquy ceased to be of interest to anybody except the two persons concerned. It was interrupted by the entrance of a short procession which habitually invaded the library at that hour. First marched a majestic nurse, carrying in her arms the recently born heir; behind her walked the proud grandmother, making those idiotic noises which are supposed to captivate the fancy of callow humanity; while the rear was brought up by Lady Constantia, a gaunt, sable-clad figure. Lady Constantia, who was domiciled in the dower-house, a couple of miles away, was not a very frequent visitor at her former home. With Hubert she was upon terms of amity; but she pretended to no great affection for her kinswoman, who lived in abject fear of her, and she had stated in so many words that she could detect nothing admirable or distinctive about the latest addition to the family circle. It was noticeable, however, that she was apt to drop in at the time of day when he was on view. She now sat down stiffly, and watched with sardonic curiosity the frolicsome behaviour of Mrs. Hadlow, who, taking her grandson from the nurse's

filled, Cyril the younger gave
the treatment applied to him
after which, being, like most
with a hasty and umbrageous
bellow himself purple in the fa-
ments of his mother, his gra-
failing to pacify him, Lady
imperatively:

“Here! give it to me!”

Strange to say, she was ob-
prompt peace was the result.
of Kingsmoreton discerned in
knees and a visage of uncon-
appealed to his sense of hur-
plained; but as a fact, he be-
and then from a diminutive
chuckling imp. He clapped
rolled his eyes in a sort of d-
pleased to accept the gold w-
which he at once put into hi-

“I abhor the human yo-
announced, quietly enjoying h-
own easily enough.”

"But I never," Lady Constantia went on, "permitted them to be a public nuisance. Firmness and kindness, depend upon it, are all they need."

"If that was my watch," Hubert remarked, "I should firmly and kindly put it back in my pocket before the works were ruined."

"You would do no such thing," Lady Constantia retorted; "you would leave it where it is a great deal longer than I shall. As soon as it has served its purpose I shall take it away, and you will see that there will be no trouble about the matter."

The entrance of Cyril the elder, accompanied by his two sisters, may have preserved his namesake from bringing discredit upon that assertion. At all events, attention was withdrawn from the latter and transferred to the new-comer, who met with a reception which should have been pleasant to him.

He found it, in truth, even more pleasant than he had anticipated to be thus surrounded by friendly, happy faces. Many a time during his prolonged absence and desultory journeyings had he longed to be back with his own people once more, and if he had resisted that longing, it was not only because—as he had alleged—he had work to do and lessons to learn for which England afforded no scope. A man thrown back upon himself for companionship may learn much, unconnected with art, of which he would have remained ignorant under other conditions, and perhaps this had been Cyril's lot. Sometimes he thought it had, although there were other times when he doubted whether he would ever get at the real truth of things, subjectively or objectively. Of one thing, however, he

He handed the *Morning* looking at the paragraph relating "My word!" read:

"A marriage has been immediately, between Mr. Devon, and Adela, widow late M.P. for the King county."

There was a hubbub amidst which Lady Const that she, for one, was not guessed what she was after did not gain her object soon.

"Oh, well," said Cyril, "he is so very much to be p charming, capable and intelligent, that is just what he needs."

"Perhaps it is," agreed Violet, "I never disputed Adela's charm. I am sure she is much too intelligent for her husband. Poor Bob!"

Violet confided to her brother

prospect of a first meeting was not altogether pleasant. Now I shall be all right. If anybody feels awkward, it will be Mr. Robert Luscombe and his mature bride. Not that anything would be likely to make *her* feel awkward."

"Nothing, I am sure, would ever make her look so," answered Cyril. "You will find her a pleasant neighbour, and you will see a good deal of her, I daresay."

"One is bound to see a good deal of one's neighbours in an old-fashioned district like this," remarked Violet. "Which reminds me that I am going to take you over to Mannington to-morrow afternoon."

Cyril replied that he would be delighted. Correspondence had brought him and Violet into closer relations than they had ever reached, or cared to reach, through verbal intercourse, and no doubt it was because they understood one another that they did not pursue the topic farther. To the same cause, perhaps, may be assigned Violet's plea to be let off her engagement when the following afternoon came; although the reason she gave was that it would be cruel to take the horses out in such a cold wind.

"Really I think it would," Cyril assented. "We'll postpone our visit, then."

"Oh, but that will be so dull for you," Violet objected, "with all the other men off shooting and nothing to do in the house. I thought very likely you wouldn't mind walking over and making my excuses to Mabel, who will be expecting us."

He answered, without change of countenance, that he would enjoy the walk, and presently she had the

the thing ought to come on them, anyhow."

The first indispensable corner when Cyril arrived at his formed that Miss Penrose Mr. Penrose had gone out shaking hands with Mabel, that a friend and former ne pected to say after so long a It struck him that she had and it struck her that he h and anxious look; but they marks upon one another's apj sation, indeed, was of a natu assuredly not themselves—ur had seen the announcement jected marriage.

"I saw it this morning," an extraordinary thing to ha

"Not at all, according to only wonders that it didn't

"Ah, she means that it Adela, and perhaps it isn't.



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“Oh, I don’t think you were ever very difficult to understand.”

Cyril made a despondent gesture. “How well I remember your telling me once that I was! And considering what a puzzle my past conduct is to myself, I did hope that it might have appeared baffling to others. Well, at least you can’t know what it was that brought me within measurable distance of becoming Adela’s husband. Would it bore you to hear?”

“Of course not,” answered Mabel; “but—does that matter now?”

“To me it does. I must begin by confessing that I didn’t realise the truth at the time. For an earnest seeker after truth, as I flatter myself that I am, I don’t seem to be gifted with much natural instinct in the way of hitting off the right scent; but that’s more my misfortune than my fault. When I asked Mrs. Spencer to marry me, I was under the impression—well, I suppose you will laugh when I tell you that the last time we met I was quite under the impression that Hubert had lost his heart to you, not to Violet.”

She did laugh a little at that (although, as he might have guessed, it was no news to her); but it was with a graver and less pleased face that she listened to his further confession of the construction which he had placed upon her words on the occasion referred to.

“I don’t wonder that your pursuit of truth leads you rather far from the line if you start with such very odd convictions about people who have done nothing to deserve them,” she drily remarked.

It is needless to report lengthy narration upon which He was not, perhaps, very with such scrupulous accuracy which was none that averred—by reason of his passion it as anything of the kind that she ought to hear all her about his alternate hot her how at Fontainebleau his avowal, how he had been cleared of the situation on his return during his late wanderings his ever diminishing success, to judge malady was curable and how conclude that the most he slow extinction through loss heard him out with much her colour came and went either appeared, upon the whole, to flattered or angered or surprised



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“Please!”

“Then I must remind you of what you yourself so plainly see, that although we might be paired, we never could be matched. We should be pulling away from one another all the time.”

“Not necessarily. One of us has grown a good deal more tractable than he was.”

She went on, without heeding this interpolation: “You are a town mouse, I am a country mouse; you are an ultra-Radical, I am a Conservative to the marrow of my bones; your fetish is art, mine is sport.”

“You might add that you are rich, while I am poor. To me that is the hardest thing of all to swallow; but neither that nor any of the other drawbacks that you have mentioned would be worth a moment’s consideration if we really loved one another.”

“I quite agree with you; I don’t think they would. As for your being what you choose to call poor, it would be an insult to you and a back-handed one to myself to say anything about that. I only state these objections because I remember that you always laid a good deal of stress upon such things. It is natural that you should, looking at marriage as you do. But there is another objection—an absolutely fatal one to me, who have different ideas of what marriage is, or ought to be——”

“Of course if you don’t and can’t care for me, that must be fatal.”

“Yes; but that was not what I was going to say. I wonder whether you recollect my telling you once,

long ago, that you did not know what love was. Well, you have made it more clear to me than ever now that you don't. As if any man who was really in love would try for the best part of three years to believe that he wasn't!"

"He would if he believed that there was little or no chance of his love being returned."

"Would he? I should have thought that he would at least give the other person some chance of returning it."

Cyril, who had been walking to and fro, came to a halt in front of her. "Mabel," said he, "I love you as dearly, as deeply, as devotedly as any man has ever loved any woman. And what is more," he suddenly added, "you know it!"

She drew back a little and for the first time exhibited those symptoms of uneasiness which are apt to presage a capitulation.





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